

THE CASTAWAYS

OR, ON THE FLORIDA REEFS

JAMES OTIS

AN ILLUSTRATED PIGGY STORY STUDIO EDITION



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The Castaways — Chapter I

On Board The Sea Queen

The noisy, consequential-looking little tug-boat which came alongside the big three-masted schooner Sea Queen, as she lay at the dock in Brooklyn, puffed and panted as if nearly overcome by the fervent rays of the August sun, while down her dingy smokestack ran tiny streams of water like perspiration, causing the cook of the vessel to say to the boy who was leaning over the rail by his side:

“I never see them little boats in hot weather without thinkin’ they feel the heat jest like we do. It seems as if they breathe harder in the summer, an’ kinder hate to do very much heavy work.”

“That one don’t act as if she felt very bad about towing us down the bay, Jake,” the boy said, with a laugh, as he watched the little craft which danced about on the swell caused by a passing steamer as if bowing and courtesying to the deeply-laden schooner which required her aid. “Perhaps she feels badly to think that she has got to come back here when it is so warm, while we are going out to sea where it will be cool.”

“Yes, we’ll find a breeze outside most likely that’ll prevent us from bein’ actually baked,” the cook said thoughtfully, as he gazed at the sailors lowering fenders, making hawsers fast, and otherwise getting ready to avail themselves of the services of the tug. “You mustn’t think, though, that we’re going to have it comfortable very long, Benny, my boy, for this won’t seem much more’n a nice warm day compared to the weather in Tampico. Whatever made Captain Irwin agree to the charter is more’n I can figger out.”

“He said if he hadn’t taken command of this vessel perhaps he wouldn’t have got a job for two or three months, and you know she was pretty near loaded before we came aboard.”

“That’s what he said, I’ll admit,” the cook replied as, having assured himself that the tug had been made fast in a proper manner, he gave his individual attention to the boy. “But if I don’t want to swaller all he says there ain’t anything in the shippin’ papers to make me do it, is there, Ben Clark?”

“Of course you can suit yourself; but I wouldn’t like to believe he’d tell a lie.”

"Now that's jest the pint of the whole thing," and Jake seated himself on a coil of rope where the shadow of a belaying-pin fell directly across his nose. "If I was brought up in the same town with Captain Jack Irwin, if I used to go in swimmin' with him, traded jack-knives, had the mumps the same time he had, an' let him catch my measles, then I oughter know him better'n you do who hadn't seen him a year ago."

"That's a fact."

"Well this is how it stands. Captain Irwin is way up as a skipper. If I was a ship-owner, I'd rather have him on board a vessel of mine than any other four men I ever saw; but he won't tell the truth when he's talkin' about himself. To hear him you'd think he wasn't anything more'n a common, everyday captain; but I know him better, as I've got a right to do, an' I tell you he could a' had his pick outter the ships layin' in this port if he'd only hung round long enough for folks to get acquainted with him, an' then we shouldn't be bound for Mexico in the summer."

Ben looked relieved at thus learning that, according to the cook's ideas, deprecation of his own abilities was the only charge brought against the captain, and he asked, as he gazed over the rail at the tug which was laying quietly alongside, much as if resting after her severe exertions:

"Why don't we start, Jake? The schooner is ready to leave, an' the captain went ashore most an hour ago."

"I 'spose he's up at the owner's office. The mate told me we were goin' to have some passengers, so I must be cookin' all the time to satisfy 'em. There's no use in talkin'; I do hate to be aboard a vessel where there are a lot of swells snoopin' round askin' why this thing ain't served in this way or that. It may pay the owners, but it's awful wearin' on the cook."

"But perhaps these passengers ain't very fussy, an' you won't have any more to do than if they wasn't on board."

"Don't believe yourself, my boy. They'll be jest like all the rest, an' after they get over bein' sick you'll think they own the schooner an' all the cargo."

"Do you suppose there will be many?" Ben asked, a look of alarm overspreading his face.

"I don't know, an' so far as I'm concerned it don't make very much difference, for one will be the same trouble as a dozen."

Jake sighed, broke a splinter from a stick of wood which lay on the deck, and began chewing it with an expression of deepest sorrow on his face. Fortunately for Ben's peace of mind he knew there was not nearly as much

woe in the cook's heart as one might suppose from his countenance; it was a peculiarity of his to look sad because of trifles, and, as Captain Irwin often said, "his greatest pleasure was found in grief."

It was not long, however, that either the man or the boy were left to speculate as to the number of passengers which the Sea Queen was to carry. In a very few moments after Jake had begun his lunch of pine wood Captain Irwin came on the pier, and with him was a dark, stern-looking man whose face was so nearly covered with whiskers that little more than his eyes and nose could be seen; but these features were sufficient, so Ben thought, to prove that he would be a very disagreeable passenger. It was hardly fair for Master Clark to thus form any opinion as to the gentleman's character, for he had only bestowed one brief glance upon the mass of hair, and had then given his undivided attention to a little girl who was being led--one might almost say being dragged along--by the stranger.

Even if the child had not been thus forced to walk toward the Sea Queen, one would have said she was an unwilling passenger, because of the timid glances which she cast from time to time at the schooner. She was a pale, fragile-looking little thing, with big, brown eyes, which Ben fancied were filled with tears, and a profusion of chestnut hair, that would persist in falling in wavy tress or curl, despite all attempts at confining it with ribbon or comb.

"There's one passenger who won't give you very much trouble, Jake," the boy said as he turned to look at the cook, whose grief appeared to have suddenly departed.

"If them two are the only ones who are comin' with us, we'll get along all right, pervidin' the man is seasick from the time we cross the bar till we sight the Mexican coast," the cook replied in a tone of relief, and then the new-comers were so near that any further conversation would have been overheard.

Two trunks and several large boxes were wheeled onto the pier by porters, who followed a short distance behind the captain and his passengers, and in less than ten minutes from the time Ben caught the first glimpse of the girl's face, the Sea Queen was being escorted down the bay by the panting, perspiring tug.

Ben Clark was nominally the cabin-boy of the schooner. Captain Irwin had promised to care for him as he would for a son, giving him such an education as should fit him for the position of ship-master after he had served an apprenticeship as seaman. Therefore, he was a privileged character on board;

required to perform all the duties of captain's boy, but allowed to spend his leisure time as best pleased him. Yet very far from being a sailor, and having been on shipboard but once before, during a voyage from Savannah to New York, Master Clark found plenty of amusement in all that was taking place. He saw the passengers go into the cabin at the moment that the orders were given for getting under way, and then he paid no further attention to the new-comers until the novelty of sailing down the bay had in a measure passed away.

The machinery of the tug, which he could see from the schooner's deck, the maneuvers to thread the way in and out among the craft of all kinds, with which the harbor appeared to be crowded, and the rapidly moving panorama spread out before him, all served to enchain his attention until after Staten Island had been left astern, when he suddenly became aware that the most attractive of the two passengers was standing close beside him.

"Do you belong on board this vessel?" she asked as the boy looked toward her with something very like admiration in his eyes.

Ben hesitated, hardly knowing what reply to make. He had been on the Sea Queen but a few days, and in that time his duties were so light, while every one was so kind, that it seemed more as if he was a guest than one of the crew.

"I s'pose I do," he stammered, after a pause of such duration that the girl began to look surprised. "I'm the cabin-boy; but Captain Irwin says I'll have to take my chances as a green hand on the next voyage."

"Will we be a good many days going to Mexico?"

"Well, now, you see I don't know anything about it," Ben said as he rubbed his chin in perplexity. "I never went to sea but once before, and that was when poor little Jim an' me got wrecked coming up from Savannah."

"Who is Jim?"

"He was my brother, an' when mother died, after father got lost at sea, I had to be kinder like a sister to him. Captain Irwin let us go to New York in a vessel of his, 'cause I thought I could earn more money there."

"Where is he now?" the girl asked, laying her soft, white hand on Ben's brown fingers, as she saw the big tears rolling down his cheeks.

"The old lady who took care of him when he was sick said God had to have more angels, so he died. I don't know what I'd a' done after little Jim went away if the captain of this schooner hadn't wanted me to come with him, an' I'm to go wherever he does until I'm old enough an' know enough to sail a vessel myself."

"Is he kind to you?" the girl asked in a whisper, glancing around when she spoke, much as if afraid that a third person might have heard the question.

"Kind? Why, he's as good as if I was a candy image. He did all he could for Jim, an' since the poor little chap was buried he bought me these clothes, gave me a swell jack-knife, an' two dollars in money. All I have to do is help Jake an' keep the cabin clean, an' that don't 'mount to anything. Say, what's your name?"

"Gertrude Morris."

"I s'pose that was your father you came aboard with?"

"Indeed it wasn't," she replied indignantly and with a glance of apprehension toward the cabin door. "My own papa died years and years ago while I was a baby, and this man married my mother before I can remember. I don't think he was kind to her, for he went away ever so long ago and didn't come back even when she got sick and had to leave me. Mrs. Martin let me live with her until last week, when he came to New York and said he was going to take me to Mexico. I cried and cried, until he shook me awfully, and then made me go with him to a dirty, stuffy hotel over in Hoboken, where I had to stay till this morning. If he had let go of my hand just for one little minute when we were coming here, I'd have run away."

"Is he ugly to you?" Ben whispered.

"He had a rope stretched across the room and made me try to walk on it. I didn't know how to, of course, and every time I fell off he whipped me with a strap till--it--it----"

She could say no more, for the tears from her eyes seemed to have gotten into her throat, and with her face pressed close to Ben's hand she sobbed and cried until her companion grew alarmed at the vehemence of her grief. He tried to say something which would console her, but the words refused to come at his bidding, and before he could do the least thing to assure her of his sympathy, her step-father came out of the cabin looking more disagreeable and ill-tempered than before, as he called sharply:

"Gertrude! Instead of trying to excite the pity of the sailors by a recital of your imaginary troubles, it would be better to go to your state-room, for there will be so much motion to the vessel presently that you will undoubtedly be sick."

The child ceased crying the instant she heard his voice, and for a moment Ben thought she was about to disobey this command, which had been given under the cloak of advice. She brushed the tears from her eyes quickly and

turned as if to make some reply; but standing irresolutely several seconds, she walked silently into the cabin, her step-father following, after he had taken a long and deliberate survey of the boy.

“You ought to have your head thumped; that’s what you are aching for,” Ben said in a low but angry tone as he shook his fist threateningly toward the cabin door. “I jest hope you’ll be sick before we cross the bar, an’ that you can’t so much as lift your finger till the voyage is ended. Poor little girl! I wonder if Jake an’ me can’t manage to get her clear of that old heathen? I’ll jest tell him the whole story an’ see what he says.”

The Castaways — Chapter II

A Consultation

Jake was in the galley making preparations for dinner when Ben entered, and he was trying to do so many things at the same time that it surely seemed as if it would be out of the question for him to give proper attention to even the most simple proposition. Bread-making was apparently the important one of his varied duties, for he continued to knead the dough some time after one of the pots on the range had protested against his neglect by allowing a portion of its contents to boil over with an angry hiss and smother of steam.

Ben was too much excited by the brief story Gertrude had told to be willing to wait until a more convenient season before asking the cook's advice. While Jake worked he repeated what he had heard, adding many comments of his own, until, before he concluded the brief recital, the bread-maker had paused with his arms in the flour to the elbows and an expression of mingled anger and pity on his face.

"I've heard of people trainin' children to walk on a tight-rope an' all them monkey shines, but I never more'n half-believed such yarns till now. There's one blessed thing though, which is that Mr. Whiskers won't rig anything here for that poor little girl to fall from, for Captain Jack Irwin ain't the kind of a man to allow such capers."

"But he can do whatever he pleases when we get to Mexico, Jake, and that's what we ought to look out for."

"I declare, I don't see how it can be done, my boy," and Jake leaned over the bread-pan, wholly oblivious of the many half-cooked articles of food which required his attention. The dough was allowed to mix itself with more flour than was consistent with lightness, the pots and pans seemed bent on a regular boycott of their contents, and the passengers and crew of the Sea Queen were in great danger of being deprived of their dinner owing to the very deep study into which the cook had so suddenly been plunged.

"Why not tell Captain Irwin all about it and get him to take the little girl away from that man?"

"It would be a ticklish kind of business, 'cause you see he's her step-father, even if she don't call him so, an' could put the law right onto anybody who tried to take her away."

"But you don't mean to say that you sha'n't do anything toward helping the poor little thing?" Ben cried excitedly.

"Of course not. We've got plenty of time to fix up some sort of a plan, an' he won't dare be very rough to her while he's on board. Bless my eyes! Here's this dinner pretty nigh spoiled on account of my yarnin' with you. Get aft where you belong, an' I'll see you again to-night."

From the conflict that was going on between the water which was boiling over from the kettles, and the fire, it was easy for Ben to understand that it would be to the advantage of all on board, so far as dinner was concerned, if the cook was left alone for a while, therefore he went aft as Jake had requested.

The Sea Queen was now well down in the lower bay, rising and falling on the gentle swell as if practising that she might be ready to dance on the boisterous waves of the ocean just beyond. The sailors were loosing, hoisting and sheeting home the canvas preparatory to dispensing with the services of the tug, and on both steamer and schooner Ben found quite as much confusion, although of a different kind, as he had left in the galley. No one paid any attention to him, and not until Jake called to remind him it was time to be laying the cabin-table for dinner, did he even so much as think of his work.

He had expected to see Gertrude on deck when her step-father came out of the cabin about ten minutes after the consultation with Jake was brought to a close; but she did not appear until he knocked on the door to announce that dinner was ready.

While Ben was waiting upon the table he had many opportunities of exchanging glances with the little girl who had succeeded so well in enlisting his sympathies, and it pleased him wonderfully, because she seemed to consider him her friend. He was decidedly puzzled before the meal was finished by hearing Captain Irwin address the man as "Dr. Harlan," and he could not understand how it was that Gertrude did not bear the same name as her step-father.

By the time he had taken away the dishes and set the cabin to rights, he no longer cared to speculate upon any question, for the Sea Queen, having parted company with the tug, was climbing up one wave and sliding down another in a manner that made him feel very uncomfortable in the region of the stomach.

"I can't stay in the cabin any longer," he said in reply to a question of the cook's, as he sat on the deck with his back against the galley, his white face

telling quite as plainly as words could have done, of the very disagreeable sensations which were rapidly overpowering him. "I feel just the same as I did that first night Jim an' me were on board the Clitie."

"You'll get over it quicker than you did then," Jake said consolingly. "These short seas make the old hooker jump around pretty lively, an' she has shaken you up a bit, that's all. I'll look out for things aft, an' you do whatever you think will make you feel the most comfortable."

Then Ben gave himself wholly up to the malady which was assailing him, paying no attention to anything save his own discomfort for nearly two hours, when Jake, who had not come out of the cabin, said:

"There's one good thing about all this bobbery, which is that Dr. Harlan, as he calls hisself, is about as sick a man as I ever heard of. He's goin' on dreadful in his state-room, an' I hope he'll keep so till we bring up in the gulf. The little girl is as chipper as a sparrer; she's alongside of Bill Barlow, who's takin' his trick at the wheel, her brown hair a-flyin' an' her eyes a-sparklin' like a Mother Carey's chicken enjoyin' the tumble."

Ben had been so deeply occupied with the disagreeable affair which had prevented him from performing his duties as cabin-boy, that he had given no heed to anything around him until Jake made this last remark, and then it was with a feeling very nearly like shame that he looked aft at Gertie, who was apparently extracting a great deal of enjoyment from that which so distressed him. He understood that his present appearance was hardly calculated to give the idea that he could aid her in escaping from the life which her step-father evidently intended she should lead, and as he had fully made up his mind he would be her protector, it was necessary to assume a more dignified air and position.

"If she ain't sick I don't see why I should be when I've been on vessels a good deal more'n she has," he said, as he staggered to his feet, catching hold of the mainstay to prevent himself from falling.

"Well, you see, there's a difference in people," Jake said in a philosophic tone. "I reckon you'll get your sea-legs on right quick if you move around a bit, an' the best thing you can do is to go aft an' talk with her. You'll feel well enough if you keep your mind away from your stomach, for its only when the two get chumming together that folks are sick."

Ben did not understand this line of argument; but he went aft, impelled to do so by pride rather than the cook's advice.

“Look pleasant or she’ll think you’re dyin’,” Jake said in a hoarse whisper, when the cabin-boy crept slowly along, clinging to the rail, as if fearing he might be thrown overboard, and the latter did his best to act upon the suggestion by wrinkling his face into that which he hoped would resemble a smile.



“Why, what’s the matter?” Gertie asked solicitously, as she left the helmsman’s side to aid her disconsolate-looking friend.

“I--I--you see I’m not feeling very well,” Ben managed to say after many a gasp and inward shudder. “I don’t think it’s nice to have the vessel jump around so, do you?”

“It seems perfectly splendid. Does it make you sick?”

“Well--I--yes, just a little,” and Ben clutched the rail yet more frantically as the *Sea Queen*’s bow divided a huge wave which sent the spray in showers over the weather side.

“But I thought sailors never got that way,” Gertie said in surprise.

“I don’t ’spose they do, but you see I’m not a whole one yet. After we get back from Mexico I guess I won’t mind these kind of waves any more’n Jake does. Ain’t you feeling bad a little bit?”

"Not the same as you do. If it was Mrs. Martin I was going away with I'd be as happy as a bird; but when I think of what he will make me do after we leave this vessel, it seems as if I oughtn't ever laugh."

"Don't you worry about that," Ben said as he tried very hard to appear brave, but succeeded only in looking as if he was growing more ill. "Jake will help me, an' we'll find some way to keep him from makin' you walk on a rope."

"I'm afraid you can't," she replied with a sigh. "You don't know how cruel and strong he is."

"We'll fix it somehow," Ben said confidently; and then, in answer to her questions, he told of his life in Savannah, of little Jim, toward whom he had tried to act the part of sister, as well as of the plans he had formed for the future, until suddenly he became aware that the nausea had departed, leaving him in a condition to attend to his duties once more.

He was not one who would willingly neglect his work, and knowing he was surely needed in the galley if not in the cabin, went forward, after assuring Gertie that with Jake's assistance he would devise some plan to prevent Dr. Harlan from forcing her to become a tight-rope performer.

Before the second meal had been eaten, the deck of the Sea Queen was neither a pleasant nor a comfortable place. The wind had increased in force until Jake gravely told Ben that "there was danger the captain's whiskers would be carried away;" and every now and then the top of a green wave would come rolling in over the bow as if determined to bury the schooner.

As a matter of course, Gertie was obliged to remain below, and since it was difficult to sit on the lockers which served as chairs, she had gone directly to her state-room, thereby preventing Ben from holding any conversation with her while attending to his duties in the cabin. He could talk with Jake, however, and in a snug corner of the galley, after the labors of the day were ended, the would-be protectors of Dr. Harlan's step-daughter tried to form some mutually agreeable plan of action.

"I've been turnin' this matter over in my mind all the afternoon," Jake said thoughtfully, when he had lighted his pipe and puffed vigorously until he was confident the tobacco was well on fire, "but I can't seem to think of but one thing we could do, an' even that depends on the way the captain takes it."

"Tell me about it," and Ben pushed himself more closely into the corner lest the violent tossing of the vessel should throw him forward onto the stove.

"I don't know as it'll amount to anything, but here it is. You see the schooner is to put into Key West, an' we'll likely be there two or three days.

Now, if you an' me could make that blessed doctor think as how as we was goin' to stay a week or more, he might go pryin' round the island till we gave him the slip, an' then we would carry the little girl to the folks in New York."

"If we only could do that!" Ben exclaimed, delighted with the originality as well as the simplicity of the plan.

"There's but one thing as stands in the way," Jake replied with the air of a man who feels that he could devise more brilliant schemes if the necessity should arise.

"What is it?"

"The captain mightn't be willin' to leave a passenger what has paid his fare."

Ben's face clouded as this flaw in the otherwise perfect plan was pointed out by the originator, and his spirits fell as rapidly as they had been raised. He felt quite positive that Captain Irwin would not sail without his passengers, and already did he begin to despair of being able to fulfil his promise.

"Howsomever," Jake said, after a long and painful pause, "we don't know that he won't do what we want, an' we've got plenty of time to think up some plan if this falls through, so the best thing we can do is to turn in before the old hooker tumbles around so lively that we can't get over the side of our bunk."

It was several days before Ben found an opportunity to have any further conversation on the subject which was ever present in his mind. The wind which the Sea Queen had met so soon after leaving port was decidedly heavier than a summer breeze, and the schooner was tossed about at such a violent rate on the angry waters, that the cabin-boy's time was so fully occupied as to preclude the possibility of anything save the briefest interviews with Jake.

In the meantime Dr. Harlan had recovered sufficiently from his indisposition to be able to spend the greater portion of each day in the saloon, and to the surprise and disappointment of Ben, he insisted that Gertie should remain with him, singing such songs as appeared to strike his fancy.

"I can't make it out at all," Master Clark said on the afternoon of the fifth day, when the gale had so nearly abated that it was pleasant to be on deck. He was holding another consultation with Jake, and had given a detailed account of how the passengers were employed.

"I reckon the captain knows all about it. He was in the galley late last night while I was fixin' up a lunch for him an' the first mate, an' here's what he told me he'd got from the man himself. This 'ere doctor ain't no doctor at all, but jest goes round selling quack medicines--he's got a whole raft of 'em on board

now. He's found out that we're likely to be in Key West some time, an' he told Captain Irwin as how he was goin' on shore to see what he could do in the way of business. Now, it's my idea, an' the mate thinks the same thing, that he's goin' to take the girl with him so's she can sing on the street to attract a crowd--you can make up your mind that's why he wants to start her rope-walkin'. I've seen them kind of dodges lots of times, an' a pretty little thing like her would draw twice as many people as ever he could."

"He wouldn't dare try to make her do anything like that!" Ben cried indignantly; but even as he spoke it could easily be seen by the expression of his face that he feared the cook had told the truth.

"Why shouldn't he dare? Ain't he her nateral guardian now her mother's dead, an' can't he make her do whatever he chooses?"

"But won't Captain Irwin stop him?" Ben asked.

"How can he? He says he'd like to interfere, but it wouldn't do any good. Even if he could get her out of the scrape by goin' to the officers of the law, he can't afford to keep the vessel layin' idle."

"Isn't it possible for us to do something, Jake?"

"I'm afraid not, my boy. Even the chance of leavin' the quack doctor behind will be knocked in the head if he takes her on shore with him."

"She'll cry her eyes out if that has to be done. She's scared of him now, an' what will she do if she's got to sing on the street? It wouldn't be so awfully jolly for a rough feller like me, an' it'll use her all up."

"I s'pose it will, but I don't see how we can help her," and Jake returned to his work, while Ben, his heart full of grief because of the suffering in store for his little friend, stood by the cabin-door listening to the childish voice which even now sounded strained and weary as it repeated again and again an air which the doctor probably intended should be sung in public.

The Castaways — Chapter III

A Quack Doctor

The wind storm which caused the Sea Queen to dance so violently about to the discomfort of several on board, and more particularly the cabin-boy, bore the schooner very swiftly toward her destination. On the same evening that it began to subside into a well-behaved summer breeze, the light on Alligator Reef was sighted, and Captain Irwin confidently announced that the first half of the voyage would be ended before the sun could set again.

During all these six days Ben had had no opportunity of holding any extended conversation with Gertie. Several times while at work in the cabin he was able to ask or answer a few questions by which he and, through him, Jake learned that the so-called doctor was industriously engaged in preparing her for those duties he intended she should perform, excepting, of course, the tight-rope business; but she evidently had no idea that she was to appear before the public of Key West.

Ben hesitated about telling her what he and Jake believed she would be forced to do, for there was a chance that Dr. Harlan would not oblige her to begin the distasteful work until after arriving at Mexico, and it would be cruel to distress her unnecessarily. That Gertie was grieving sorely, Ben knew only too well; several times when they met in the cabin her eyes were red, as from crying, and on one occasion the boy found the opportunity to ask, in a cautious whisper, when the doctor had gone in to his state-room for a moment:

“Has he been abusin’ you?”

“He hasn’t beat me, if that’s what you mean; but I know he would if I didn’t obey him in everything. I can’t help crying, Ben, when I think of being forced to leave everybody who loved me, and go away where I won’t be liable even to talk with a soul except the man who was cruel to my mother.”

Then the tears began to flow anew; but before Ben could whisper the shortest word of comfort, the doctor re-entered the cabin, and Gertie was summoned for another music lesson.

After this it was as if the cook and the cabin-boy could no longer meet without holding at least a brief consultation as to what should be done to aid the girl in whom they were both so deeply interested. If it chanced that these

two particular members of the crew came on deck at the same time, a whispered conversation was certain to ensue, and every evening they held what Bill Barlow called a “reg’lar caucus” in the galley; but they had not succeeded in forming a plan which could be carried into execution. It is true that Jake supplemented his first scheme with several others equally original and, to his mind, brilliant; but none of them found favor in Ben’s eyes.

When the Sea Queen, leaving behind the key with the charming name of Eastern Sambo, entered the main channel and dropped anchor in Key West harbor, the conspirators were yet undecided as to what course of action they should pursue. While nearing the port Ben had tried persistently but unsuccessfully to speak with Gertie. It seemed very much as if Dr. Harlan feared that some attempt might be made to interfere with his plans, for he did not allow the girl to move from his side during the day that the schooner was skirting the keys; and when about an hour after sunset the heavily laden craft swung to her moorings, he peremptorily ordered her to retire.

“It’s no use. I can’t get so much as a chance to grin at her without that doctor’s pokin’ his nose ’round her ear to see what I’m up to,” Ben said in a disconsolate tone as he entered the galley, after having remained on the quarter-deck or in the cabin during the entire afternoon. “I don’t see how we can do the least thing toward helping her.”

“It’s got past me now,” Jake replied with a sigh as he began to mix up the bread he intended to bake for breakfast. “It’s no manner of use to ask Captain Jack to interfere, ’cause he jest the same as told me I’d better mind my own business when I tried to talk to him about it last.”

“But must we let him march her off an’ not attempt to stop it?”

“I ’spose we could foller ’em an’ see that he didn’t give her a downright beatin’, though I’d have to come back in time to get dinner.”

“Then let’s do it,” Ben cried excitedly. “That would be better’n stayin’ here thinkin’ she was bein’ abused.”

“All right. You shinny around so as to get your work done in a hurry, an’ we won’t be far behind that precious quack when he lands.”

Although Jake had no suggestion to make as to what they could do in case Gertie was really ill-treated next morning, Ben felt more relieved in mind than since he first had cause to believe she would be obliged to go on shore, and when he clambered into his berth after the interview was ended, it seemed to him as if he had already done very much toward protecting the sad-faced little passenger.

That Dr. Harlan intended to meet the medicine-loving public of Key West at the earliest possible moment, was shown by his eagerness to reach the shore immediately after breakfast had been served. He had all the paraphernalia of his peculiar calling on deck before the sun looked over the horizon at the low-lying islands which the busy toilers in the sea had built, and thanks to the reward promised the sailors in case he was set ashore without delay, the long-boat was in the water when he came on deck after a hurried meal.

Gertie had made her preparations for landing, and was ready when the doctor cried impatiently that he was waiting. She evidently had no suspicion as to why he was so anxious to have her accompany him, but thought she was to spend the day in sight-seeing, which would be a decidedly pleasant relief from the monotony of practicing songs which had no other accompaniment than her step-father's tum, tum, tum upon the table with his fingers.

The long-boat had been rowed to the shore and back again before Ben finished his work, and he was in a painful state of anxiety lest it should be impossible to find the medicine vender, but Jake's words soon dispelled his fears.

"Don't you worry about that, my hearty," the cook said consolingly. "The town ain't so big but that we can run 'em down in half an hour; and beside, if you was ready to go ashore this blessed minute it couldn't be done till Captain Irwin wants to start. It'll take that quack quite a while to get his traps in workin' order, an' we'll be there in plenty of time to see the curtain rise on what the show people call the first act."

Jake was right, as Ben learned an hour later when they arrived at the market-place, where an unusually large number of men had gathered and were gazing curiously at a small but high platform which had just been erected by three negroes. It had a red covering profusely bespangled, and on it was a table with a yet more gaudy cloth bearing a quantity of tiny boxes and bottles, while lying along the edge of the stage were great numbers of what appeared to be human teeth.

During several moments Ben looked in vain for Gertie, and just as he was beginning to hope that Dr. Harlan was not as heartless as had been supposed, the quack appeared from the rear as he lifted the child upon the platform. Her eyes were red, her lips quivering with suppressed sobs, and she hung her head as if ashamed to look at the curious ones who were pressing eagerly forward to

learn what this exhibition was, in which medicine and children took such prominent parts.

The sympathy in Ben's heart was written plainly on his face, and he clutched Jake's hand nervously when the doctor pushed Gertie forward, whispering hoarsely:

"Are you goin' to stand still an' let him do that?"

"I reckon we'll have to, my lad, though it goes mightily agin the grain. You see it's jest as the captain says, we haven't got any right to interfere, an' if we go to kickin' up a row we'd soon find ourselves in the calaboose."

"I'd be willin' to go most anywhere if I could knock him down once!" Ben exclaimed savagely.

"I don't want to get into any law scrape," the cook replied slowly, and at the same time vindictively, "but if I can't manage to pour a plate-full of hot soup down the back of his neck before this voyage is ended, it'll be because I don't get a chance to make any."

This threat had the effect of soothing Ben to such a degree of calmness that he was able to watch quietly the movements of the two on the platform, although his compressed lips and clinched hands told that any very cruel act on the part of the doctor might cause an outbreak from him.

It hardly seemed necessary for the quack to do anything more in order to attract a crowd, for already were the idle people of the town gathered in front of his gaudily decorated platform; but he evidently intended to carry out the programme by way of rehearsal for his new performer.

Gertie stood timid and shrinking at the very edge of the stage until her step-father made a threatening gesture, at the same time he whispered a few words which, from the expression on his face, Ben believed to be a menace, and then she advanced slowly, singing in a low, tremulous, but yet sweet voice one of the songs the crew of the Sea Queen had so often heard her practicing.

"After seein' him make that child stand up here before the riff-raff of the town, I wouldn't buy a bit of medicine from him if I was starvin' to death," Jake said angrily, and Ben squeezed the cook's hand in token of admiration of his sentiments.

When the song was concluded the doctor motioned Gertie to a seat on the rear of the stage and then begun his work of announcing that he had visited Key West in order to benefit its inhabitants, rather than for any pecuniary gain to himself. In proof of this assertion, which was received with a low murmur of incredulity from the crowd, he offered to extract teeth free of charge for

every person on the island, insisting so strongly that there must be some one among the audience who was in need of such service that a big, burly negro was finally induced to present himself as a candidate for the quack's kindly offices.

When the operation--evidently painful to the patient and amusing to the spectators--was ended, the doctor proceeded to call attention to the nostrums and pills on the table, declaring that each of them was a specific for any disease from tic-douloureux to consumption. In fact, according to his positive statement, it was necessary only to have a dollar's worth of these medicines in the house to ward off the attacks of death in any form other than that of old age.

"He was comin' it so strong one spell," Jake said with a sigh of relief, when the quack finally admitted that a person might possibly cross the dark river even after purchasing his medicines, "I begun to be afraid he'd swear his customers wouldn't ever die. But don't let's loaf 'round here any longer, Ben; he's a reg'lar scamp, an' it ain't creditable to a man to be listenin' at what he says."

"I don't want to go away and leave Gertie alone," the boy replied as he held Jake more firmly by the hand. "It's cruel to run off when we're the only friends she's got here."

"But she hasn't seen you yet, an' isn't likely to while her precious father has so many customers around. You might as well be on the schooner, for there's no chance he'll mistreat her while he's sellin' his swindlin' stuff."

"It'll make her feel better afterward if she knows we stayed. It seems as if we ought to do that much for her."

"Then I'll leave you to keep lookout while I go on board, for it's time to be thinkin' about gettin' dinner. The schooner will be hauled into the wharf before night, so you won't have any trouble in findin' her, an' I'll see to the cabin work till you get back."

Ben made no protest against this arrangement, for he knew it would be useless, and Jake swung his short, bowed legs in half-circles as he walked rapidly toward the wharf where the long-boat was moored.

When he was left alone Ben determined to try to speak with Gertie. She was sitting on the rear of the platform, and her step-father was so busily engaged with the credulous in front that there was but little chance of interruption from him. To make his way around the outer fringe of the crowd, unobserved by the quack, was not a difficult matter, and when finally he stood

before the child whom he was trying to aid, if only by his presence, the look of joy and relief which came over her face would have been reward enough if he had needed any.

"How glad; oh, how glad I am that you are here!" she exclaimed, as she extended both hands until they touched his face. "How did you know where to find me?"

"It wasn't very hard work to do that, 'cause we could a' walked over the whole town in a little while. Jake an' I was afraid the doctor was goin' to make you do something like this, so we came ashore as soon after you did as we could."

"Then you knew why he forced me to sing so much on the vessel?"

"Not exactly; we only thought so, an' made up our minds to keep you in sight till we found out for sure."

"Isn't it dreadful that he should make me do such things?" she cried abruptly as an angry look came over her face. "I was terribly ashamed to stand up before all these people, and I don't think I could have done it if he hadn't threatened to whip me while every one was looking."

"Did he talk like that?" Ben cried as he clinched his hands and a deep flush appeared on his face.

"Indeed he did, and he swore at me. Oh, I can't stay with him, I'm sure I can't! How I wish I had run away somewhere the day I first saw him! Do you know," and here she leaned over so that she might whisper in the boy's ear, "I believe I regularly hate him."

"Of course you do," Ben replied in a matter-of-fact tone. "You couldn't help it, anyway. I only wish I was big enough to snap his head right off, even if Captain Irwin does say we haven't any business to interfere."

At this point the conversation was brought to an end. Having satisfied their curiosity, fully half the spectators had walked away, and those who remained were not disposed to make any further investment in medicine, therefore the doctor believed it necessary to offer some more potent attraction than his own voice.

"Come and sing to the gentlemen, Gertrude," he said in what he evidently intended should be a pleasant tone, and without turning his head. "After that we will extract a few more teeth, and perhaps then they will be better able to appreciate my invigorator."

"Do what he tells you to," Ben whispered, as Gertie hesitated. "You must give in to him now; but before we get to Mexico Jake an' I'll think up some way

to pull you out of the scrape. Don't get frightened, 'cause I'll stand here all the time to see that he don't hurt you."

Gertie followed this very sensible advice, and while she was singing Ben crouched under the edge of the platform vainly trying to form some plan by which he might fulfil his promise.

The Castaways — Chapter IV

An Ill-Timed Excursion

A long, dreary time of waiting was it for Ben as he crouched behind the platform lest the doctor should see and order him away; but whenever he was disposed to yield to the fatigue which prompted him to return to the schooner, he glanced at the pale face of Gertie on which was written deep sorrow and an almost overpowering weariness, and self was forgotten for her who seemed so entirely alone.

During such times as the quack had sufficient customers to keep him busy, Gertie and Ben could talk unrestrainedly; but whenever he had a few leisure moments, or there was a demand for a song, Master Clark deemed it best to remain out of sight, and thus he played a tedious game of hide-and-seek from early morning until nearly nine o'clock in the evening. The doctor had not thought it necessary that either his assistant or himself should have anything to eat, and, as a matter of course, no food had passed Ben's lips since that which he had partaken of so early in the day.

The public appeared to be more hungry for medicine after sunset than before, and just when Ben was thinking it was nearly midnight, Dr. Harlan said to Gertie:

"The schooner must have been hauled in at one of the piers by this time. If you think you can find her you may go now, for I shall stay here a good while longer."

The child hesitated; much as she wanted to be on board the Sea Queen, out of sight of the crowd and beyond the sound of her step-father's disagreeable voice, she did not dare attempt to make her way in the dark through the streets of a strange town alone. For the moment she had forgotten that Ben was close at hand, and he reminded her of this fact by stepping boldly in front of the doctor, as he said:

"I'll show her the way to the Sea Queen."

The quack looked scrutinizingly at the boy as if questioning whether he had ever seen him, and then suddenly remembering his face, replied:

"Oh, you belong on board the schooner. Very well, take the child with you, and see that she has something to eat before going to bed."

Ben did not wait for anything more; he felt that he would be perfectly happy had he been large enough to read with impunity the doctor a severe lesson, with his treatment of a step-daughter as the text; but that being out of the question, he did the next best thing, which was to hurry her away from the red-covered platform and the glare of the gasoline lamps as quickly as possible.

Once on the ground he clasped Gertie tightly by the hand and started at a rapid pace in the direction where he supposed the schooner to be lying; but before the two had gotten beyond the reflection of the medicine vender's lights, they heard the familiar voice of Jake, shouting:

"Hold on, my hearties, while I take you in tow," and as the cook approached he asked, "Where are you bound?"

"To the schooner. Gertie couldn't get away before, and I stayed with her."

"You'll never fetch the Sea Queen steerin' that course. She's lyin' down here a bit, an' I was afraid you'd start wrong, so I come up to set you right. Where did you get dinner?"

"We didn't have any," Ben replied emphatically. "That doctor kept right on sellin' his stuff an' wouldn't stop for anything."

"Hasn't the little girl had a bite to eat since morning?" Jake asked in astonishment, as he halted suddenly and faced the children.

"Not a mouthful, an' she's had to sing as many as twenty times."

"Well," and the cook spoke in a determined tone as he turned that the walk might be continued, "if Captain Irwin don't give that quack a piece of his mind I will, an' he'll understand what I say for a fact. But come on; don't stay here when you must be pretty near starved to death. The fire is still goin' in the galley, an' I'll give you a good square supper if it takes all the stores aboard the schooner."

Since Jake was the only one who was retarding the progress of the party, it was not difficult to carry his suggestion into effect, and he was so eager to arrive at the vessel that he insisted, despite her protestations, on taking Gertie in his arms, thus bringing the walk to a more speedy conclusion.

It was not until after the children had partaken of what seemed to be a veritable feast, even though it was served on deck just outside the galley door, that any lengthy conversation was held, owing to the fact that both had fallen asleep almost before Jake began his culinary operations. The food drove the slumber from their eyelids for the time being, and once this had been effected, Ben's thoughts immediately returned to his desire to aid Gertie.

"Supposin' she an' I should run away an' hide, would Captain Irwin stop here for us when he comes back from Mexico?"

"He couldn't promise for sure," Jake replied thoughtfully, "for you see he might get a charter that would prevent him from comin' near this place, an' then agin I don't reckon he'd listen to anything of the kind. The doctor wouldn't be very likely to go on with us if the girl was missin', an' if he stayed behind he'd be sure to find her, 'cause this is nothin' but a small island that could be hunted over from one end to another in a little while."

"I'd risk his gettin' a sight of us if we was once clear of him."

"What would you eat, or where could you sleep? I tell you, Ben, things look kinder blue just now for the little girl, but she might be a good deal worse off if she should try to run away. At all events she won't have to sing in this town any more, for when I told Captain Jack what her step-father was doin', he said he'd put a stop to some of it by sailin' to-morrow noon, though he hadn't intended to leave till the next day. I've been thinkin' that when we get to Tampico we could go to the American consul, an' perhaps he would do somethin' to help her out of the scrape."

"Do you suppose he would send me back to Mrs. Martin?" Gertie asked eagerly.

"I reckon he might. Ben an' I could tell him the whole story, an' it seems to me as if he would contrive to straighten things out. I've known of worse cases that were fixed up in proper shape by these 'ere consuls."

At this suggestion of the cook's, the first he had made regarding the matter which appeared at all feasible, both the children immediately became excited, despite their extreme weariness. Ben had a dozen questions to ask regarding the possible or probable duties of a consul, and although Jake had very little positive knowledge on the subject, he answered each one promptly, concluding by saying:

"You can both make up your minds the whole thing will be fixed jest as soon as I tell the story, an' perhaps Gertie will be sent back on this same schooner. Now that we've settled the matter, s'posen we all turn in an' bottle up a little sleep while that precious quack of ours is humbuggin' the natives."

This was another good suggestion, and Gertie went into her state-room as Ben started for the forecabin, both thinking that the cook of the Sea Queen was a very learned and able adviser.

On the following morning Dr. Harlan was ready for breakfast at an unusually early hour, and Ben was beginning to fear that Gertie would be obliged to go on shore again, when Captain Irwin said curtly:

"You will have just time to get your traps on board before we are ready to cast off once more."

"But, my dear sir," the doctor replied in a tone of such evident disappointment that the cabin-boy could with difficulty repress the most extravagant demonstrations of pleasure, "I understood you to say that we would remain here several days."

"I have changed my mind since yesterday afternoon," the captain replied stiffly. "We have got a good wind with which to get out of the harbor, and I want to take advantage of it before twelve o'clock."

The doctor did not reply, but displayed no small amount of ill-temper by finding fault with everything brought him for breakfast, and by sending back first one article of food and then another to have it prepared differently, until Jake flatly declared that "he'd be boiled before he would fool around with the quack any longer."

Captain Irwin was obliged to do a great deal of work which would otherwise have been unnecessary, in order to leave the port that day, and the cheerfulness with which he set about it showed how eager he was to save Gertie the humiliation of aiding in the patent-medicine sales. During the forenoon the doctor brought his baggage onto the pier, and very sulky and disagreeable did he look. He called gruffly to Jake, ordering him to aid in taking the goods on board, and the cook quite as gruffly replied that he "shipped to look out for the grub, not the freight;" which made the medicine-vender so angry that he threatened to flog the captain of the galley, but his ire apparently expended itself in words.

It was nearly two o'clock before the Sea Queen left the wharf, with the doctor confined to his state-room by a severe attack of the sulks, and the cabin-boy so happy that he found it almost impossible to remain in one spot more than two minutes at a time. Out the northwest channel, which is directly opposite the one by which she entered the port, the schooner sailed with a wind which came in fitful gusts, and before midnight she was lying becalmed about five miles north of the Marquesas Keys. So far as arriving at her destination was concerned it would have been quite as well if she had remained at the pier in Key West, and Dr. Harlan's temper would have been in a much more satisfactory condition.

When the passengers came on deck the next morning, they found the Sea Queen rocking lazily on the long swell of the ocean, her canvas hanging idly to the spars, with not sufficient wind to lift the tiny thread of blue which acted as a vane on the main topmast. Although the sun had but just shown himself above the horizon, the air was so sultry as to make even respiration seem difficult, and the glare from the water was painfully dazzling. The awnings were spread over the quarter-deck, but the shade thus afforded could not protect against the intense heat, and from the captain to the cabin-boy every one felt thoroughly enervated. As a matter of course, Jake was cooking breakfast, but he moved in a listless manner, glancing from time to time at those who were lounging aft as if reproaching them for being the cause of his standing over a fire on such a morning.

Until four o'clock in the afternoon nothing could be seen on the glassy surface of the water, and then Jake, who was smoking on the shady side of the caboose, called Ben from the companion-way to look at a small, round object floating about half a mile from the schooner.

"What is it?" the boy asked, feeling rather disappointed because that which the cook pointed out was apparently so uninteresting.

"A turtle, an' a good-sized one, too. He's asleep, an' it wouldn't be a hard job for any one as knows how to add him to the passenger list of this 'ere schooner."

Nothing more was required to plunge Ben into the highest state of excitement. He was no longer conscious of the heat, so great was his desire to catch a turtle, and as he ran toward the rail in order to get a better view, he cried:

"Let's try to get him, Jake. I can pull the small boat, and it wouldn't take two minutes to launch it."

Jake looked around with the air of one who is willing to oblige a friend in case it can be done without too much exertion, and then he replied:

"If you'll ask the captain to let us have the boat, I don't know but I'm willin' to go, pervidin' I can find my turtle-spear."

Ben had no fear but that the weapon could readily be found, and in a few seconds he had received the desired permission. The captain was very fond of turtle-soup, and since it seemed probable that the Sea Queen would remain where she was for some time, there was no reason why the request should not be granted.

“What are you going to do?” Gertie asked as she saw the cabin-boy bustling around much as if about to start on some important expedition.

“Out to get that fellow. Jake owns a spear, and I’m going to row the boat while he catches him, same as if it was a whale.”

“I wish I could go.”

“Why can’t you? Ask the doctor an’ I’m sure he’ll let you.”

Singular as it may seem, the medicine-vender’s fit of the sulks had been followed by something very nearly approaching an amiable frame of mind, and after being assured by Captain Irwin that Gertie would be in no danger, he readily gave permission for her to accompany the would-be turtle-catchers.

One of the sailors aided Ben in launching the small boat, but declined the invitation to join the party, giving as a reason that he “wasn’t sich an ijut as to work a pair of oars when the weather was so hot, jest on account of a sleepy turtle.” By the time the little craft was in the water, Jake came on deck armed with his spear, to which was attached a coil of stout cord.

The Sea Queen was loaded so deep that it was not a difficult matter to get over the rail into the boat, and as the painter was cast off Jake immediately assumed command by saying:

“Sit in the stern sheets, Gertie, an’ don’t so much as wink till we are fast to that feller, then yell all you want to. Ben, you’re to pull on to him, an’ remember that he’ll dive if you make the least little bit of noise with the oars. I’ll stand chock up in the bows where I can give you the course, an’ be ready to strike when we are near enough.”

There was no idea of disobeying orders. Gertie pushed herself far back on the seat and gazed as intently at the turtle as did Jake, while Ben tugged at the oars, directing the movements of the boat according to the cook’s whispered commands.

The progress was not rapid, but it was silent, and in twenty minutes Jake poised the spear for a cast. The turtle remained motionless upon the water hardly more than five yards ahead.

Then the cook waved his hand for his crew to cease rowing, and Gertie watched every movement as she literally held her breath in suspense.

During a moment as the boat glided slowly ahead the spear was held aloft, then, after a quick backward motion, it was launched forward at the full strength of the thrower’s arms, and in another instant the splashing of the water told that the iron had struck its mark.



“Hurra!” Jake shouted excitedly, as the wounded turtle suddenly disappeared, dragging after him the rope which the victorious cook allowed to slip through his hands. “We’ve got him now, an’ I’d like to see the man who says the thing could a-been done any better.”

“If the spear gets loose you’ll look in vain for him,” Ben cried, as the rope was drawn taut and the boat began to glide swiftly through the water, dragged by the captive faster than a man could have rowed.

“There’s no fear of that. The spear has a long barb which pulls out sideways each end of the point, when it strikes, an’ that will hold under the shell a good while longer than he can swim.”

The sport had now become too exciting to admit of any conversation. The water foamed and boiled around the bow of the boat as she was drawn along, and not one of the three paid any attention to the fact that they were being carried swiftly away from the schooner.

After the first mad rush the turtle came to the surface, and Jake coiled in the rope until the captive dashed off at full speed again, when he was forced to pay it out or run the risk of being pulled overboard. To relieve the strain on his arms he made the end of the towing-line fast to the forward thwart, and on the boat sped as if being propelled by steam. During more than an hour it was a series of alternate onward rushes and halts, and then the novel steed so far

gave up the contest that it was possible to pull him in over the bow, all hands being disposed to give him plenty of room because of his sharp, parrot-like mouth, which opened and shut viciously.

“He ain’t so very large,” Jake said, as he seated himself on the middle thwart, out of the reach of the snapping beak, and wiped the perspiration from his face. “He’ll weigh more’n a hundred pounds, though, an’ we’ve had as much fun as if he was twice as large. Now we’ll be workin’ our way back to the schooner, for we must have a decently long pull before us.”

As he spoke he gazed around the horizon in search of the Sea Queen, suddenly uttering a low cry of alarm as he turned toward the stern of the boat.

From the direction where he believed the schooner was lying, a huge bank of fog which covered the water and obscured even the light of the sun, was coming directly down upon them, and before either Gertie or Ben realized the situation, the little craft and its occupants were swallowed up by the cloud-like vapor.

They were in the open gulf without food, water, or means of guiding their course, and unless the fog should disappear as rapidly as it had come there was little possibility of ever seeing the Sea Queen again.

The Castaways — Chapter V

The Drifting Hulk

As the fog settled down upon the turtle-catchers, shutting out from their view the surrounding waters and enveloping them as with a misty veil which was more bewildering than the blackness of night, no one spoke for several moments. Silent and motionless they sat, gazing blankly at the vapor, which confused by its density, until there was a dim idea even in the minds of Gertie and Ben of the peril which had so suddenly come upon them.

“Do you suppose the folks on the schooner can find us?” Ben asked suddenly, his voice sounding strange and unreal in that cloud of wavy moisture which rendered the occupants of the boat indistinct to each other.

“There is just a chance of it,” Jake replied hoarsely. “Most likely somebody had our bearings before the fog shut down over them; but then again the turtle might have towed the boat a couple of miles on another course before the smother reached us.”

“How are we to get on board?” Gertie asked, and there was a long pause before Jake replied:

“That’s what I don’t exactly know. We may as well make up our minds that we’ll be on this ’ere craft quite a spell, for I reckon it’ll be mighty near dark before the fog lifts. I’m goin’ to run the risk of pullin’ up toward where I think the schooner is, and if we miss her we know that wherever mornin’ finds us the land won’t be very far away.”

Then Jake kicked the turtle, as if holding it responsible for all their trouble, and seating himself on the middle thwart, took up the oars with the air of a man who is thoroughly convinced his labor will be useless. Both the children understood from the expression of his face that he was seriously alarmed, and they sat in silent terror, alternately gazing at him and trying to peer through the vapor which seemed to grow more dense each moment.

It was a long time before the silence was broken, and then Gertie asked in a low tone:

“Please can I have a drink of water?”

“We haven’t got a drop on board,” Jake replied almost sharply, “and unless the schooner picks us up we can’t get any till we reach the land.”

“And there’s nothing to eat,” Ben added.

"It doesn't make any difference about the water," Gertrude said bravely. "I only fancied I would like some, but I'm not so very thirsty."

Ben thought it strange that this remark, made simply for the purpose of showing that she could bear privation as well as her companions, should dishearten Jake, for it surely seemed to have that effect. Instead of replying, he dropped the oars and covered his face with his hands as if in utter despair.

"Don't, please don't feel so badly," she said pleadingly. "I'm sure the ship will come after us, and how do we know but that we are close beside her now."

"Well, if children can keep their hearts up it don't seem as if an A No. 1 cook like me oughter give in, does it?" and Jake sat erect once more, straightening himself so quickly that he almost fell backward, which caused Gertie and Ben to laugh as if no danger menaced.

"You must have a spring in your backbone," Ben cried, and then all three began to laugh again, which was the very best medicine they could have had just at that time.

"I haven't been allowin' that we could be very near the schooner," Jake said as the mirth subsided, "but Gertie may be right after all, so instead of rowin' any more with a chance of goin' directly away from the Sea Queen, I reckon we'd better make all the noise we can, an' if there's anybody round here lookin' for us they'll know where we are."

Then he began to shout at the full strength of his lungs, while the others joined their weaker voices with his. Now and again he would stop a few seconds to listen for a reply, and as none came, would do his best to make a yet louder outcry, until he was so hoarse that further effort was useless. It seemed as if the thick cloud of vapor confined the sound to the vicinity of the boat, preventing it from penetrating very far in either direction.

"It 'pears like as if my voice was givin' out," he said in a hoarse whisper when it was no longer possible to speak aloud. "Time was that I could keep it up as hearty as our own quack doctor, but now I no sooner begin than I'm done."

"Gertie and I can make a good deal of noise yet," Ben said, and for fifteen minutes more the two children did their best to attract the attention of those who might aid them.

At the end of that time the fog began to assume a darker hue, and Jake announced the unwelcome fact that night was settling down over the vapor-covered waters.

"There's one thing about it that's a satisfaction," he said grimly, "we can't see the fog even if we can feel it, an' I reckon darkness is more wholesome for the eyes than that gray stuff."

While they were shouting Ben had crept past the turtle into the extreme bow of the boat, much as if he believed the sound of his voice would be sent a greater distance from that point, and as Jack spoke he was gazing ahead where the mist appeared to be darker than on either side. At first he thought it might be the shadow of a vessel; but after he had hailed twice without getting any reply, he concluded it was due to a particularly dense cloud of fog, therefore he did not call his companions' attention to it.

He had half-turned to listen to the cook, and when Jake ceased speaking he looked ahead once more, this time leaping to his feet as he shouted:

"See there! That must be the Sea Queen! Ahoy! Schooner ahoy!"

It was possible only to distinguish a large, dark object, but a short distance from the boat, and knowing it could not be land, Jake was positive they had unwittingly approached the craft all were so anxious to find.

"That is her!" he cried, and then he shouted in his hoarse voice, which was almost drowned by Gertie's clear tones, but no reply was made.

"What's the matter?" Ben asked. "Do you suppose they can't hear us?"

"They're all below sojerin'; but that don't make such a very great difference to us, seein' as how a dozen strokes will take us alongside," Jake said as he seized the oars. "Stand by to fend off, Ben, an' we'll soon be aboard the old hooker agin."

There was no necessity of issuing this command to Master Clark. He was standing in the bow with his arm outstretched, and as the little craft forged ahead under the impulse of Jake's vigorous strokes, it was hardly more than sixty seconds before he had grasped the bobstay and was calling loudly for some one to heave him a line.

Jake had turned as the boat's headway was thus checked, and gazed in bewilderment at the vessel's bow, which did not look at all familiar.

"Make the painter fast an' climb aboard," he said to Ben, after a short pause. "It seems as if all hands must a' gone turtle huntin' about the same time we did."

Master Clark tied the painter to the chains and was on the point of scrambling over the high bow when he was confronted by a coal-black face which looked almost unearthly, coming suddenly as it did from out the fog. For an instant he was on the point of leaping down, regardless whether he

struck the boat or the water, and that brief time of hesitation prevented him from committing a very foolish act, for almost immediately he heard a voice which was anything rather than terrifying in its naturalness, say devoutly:

“Bress de Lawd for hearin’ a po’ ole nigger’s prayar! What town is dis h’yar, chile? Hab yer done gone foun’ de captin?”

“I--I don’t know what you mean,” Ben stammered, thinking it was an insane woman who was gazing at him.

“What craft is this?” Jake asked, as he begun clambering on board, stopping when he was where he could swing one leg over the rail, and looking curiously around at such portions of the vessel as were visible in the fog.

“What vessel, sah?” the old woman repeated, beginning now in turn to look bewildered.

“Yes, what’s her name! I s’pose she’s got one.”

“Oh! You kinder flustered me, honey. Dis ship was called the Cy Moon fore she done gone blowed mos’ to pieces, an’ I don’t know if it’s got a name left now.”

“Cy Moon!” Jake repeated reflectively, as he sat on the rail looking earnestly at the negress until she approached nearer to gaze down on the boat in which Gertie was anxiously awaiting the result of the interview, and then the cook saw the name “Simoon” painted on a fire-bucket, which had been hidden by the woman’s clothing.

In this name there was nothing peculiar; he had seen it several times on craft ranging in size from a small fishing schooner to a full-rigged ship, and he began to feel that there was far less reason for superstitious fears than if the word had been spelled according to the pronunciation given by the negress.

“Where are the crew?” he asked as he leaped on deck.

“They all done gone lef’ me, an’ I spec’ they went on shore de oder night when de wind blowed powerful bad.”

“Do you mean to say that they abandoned the ship an’ left you to take care of yourself?” Jack asked as he walked amidships, where he could see that both masts had been blown out of the vessel, the splintered ends of the timbers showing but a few feet above the deck.

“I don’ know what dey did, sah; but it’s mos’ a week sence the wind blowed terrible, an’ Cap’en Dingley say, ‘Go to bed, aunty, till fair wedder comes.’ It ’peared like the ship was sinkin’ every minute, an’ once she rolled ober on her side till I prayed mighty loud. When I come up stairs in de mawnin’ I couldn’t fin’ de cap’en or men, an’ I’s bin right here ebber sence.”

"The old hooker was dismasted in that gale we caught outside Sandy Hook, I s'pose," Jake said in a low tone to Ben, "an' all hands were swept away, or thought they had to take to the boats mighty lively, so they didn't stop for the old woman. Where did you come from?" he asked the negress.

"Savannah, sah, an' I was goin' straight up Norf to see my boy Moses. 'Pears like you might----"

"Why, I live in Savannah!" Ben cried, seizing the old woman's hand as if the mere fact of her residing in his native city was sufficient to constitute her an intimate friend.

"Does you, chile? Wall, I'se ready to go back now, an' if Moses wants to see his ole mammy he can come whar she is. We'll go dere right straight, an' when Cap'en Dingley gits back it'll larn him not to leave anudder ole nigger woman to take keer ob his boat."

"I wish you could go there as easy as you think, aunty, but the way things are fixed I reckon you'll have to stay here a while longer, an' we'll all be lucky if this hulk drifts near enough to one of the keys for us to land. Ben, you help Gertie on board an' then we'll look around a bit to see what kind of a craft we've run into in the fog."

It was now growing dark rapidly, and such preparations as were to be made for the night ought to be hurried forward while it was yet sufficiently light for them to see what should be done. Ben clambered down into the boat, and in a few moments, thanks to the aid Jake gave from above, Gertie was brought on deck, where she was delivered into the old negress' charge, with instructions that she be taken to the cabin.

To ascertain the condition of the upper portion of the Simoon was neither a long nor a difficult task. She had been a brig-rigged vessel of about five hundred tons burden, and was loaded quite deep in the water. Both masts and the jib-boom had been carried away, while a portion of the port rail was crushed where the heavy spar had fallen upon it. The hatches were on, the steering-gear uninjured, the galley yet in a condition to be used, and from the appearance of the cabin and forecastle, it was evident the crew had believed her to be sinking, when they abandoned her so hastily that they made no attempt to take the negress with them.

"She was most likely thrown on her beam ends by a sudden slant of the wind, an' as she didn't right after the spars went, the men thought it was a case of every one for himself," Jake said when he and Ben had walked rapidly fore

and aft. "We'll try the well, an' if she hasn't got too much water aboard we can settle down half-way comfortable for the night."

The sounding-rod was yet in the socket, showing that it had been used before the hurried departure of the men, and, as near as Jake could learn, there was no more water in the brig than might have been shipped while she was on her beam-ends.

"If the plankin' had been started she would a-gone to the bottom long before this, providin' the old woman is right about havin' been here a week, an' we can reckon on plenty of provisions, 'cause she has the look of bein' well fed."

"Then I don't see why we're not pretty nicely off for folks who have lost their own vessel in the fog."

"We've got a chance to stretch our legs an' lie down in some kind of comfortable style," Jake said slowly and gravely; "but other ways we're fixed no better on this driftin' hulk than we would be in the boat, an' perhaps not so well."

"We can leave in the morning, if the wind don't come on and blow too hard."

"That's just it, my boy, if the wind don't spring up; but if we should fall in with a norther, an' there are plenty of 'em skulkin' round here, we'd stand a chance of makin' a long cruise with no port this side Davy Jones' locker."

The Castaways — Chapter VI

On The Simoon

When he first stepped aboard the drifting hulk, Ben inclined to the belief that all their troubles were over, since they were once more on a vessel, even though she was dismasted; but his spirits fell very rapidly as the cook briefly pointed out the dangers of the situation, and he began to look upon the derelict simply as a trap which had been placed in the gulf for the purpose of drowning those who sought shelter upon her.

With Jake the case was different; the fact that he had good reason for predicting evil seemed to make him quite contented with his surroundings, and he set about his preparations for the night in a sadly happy manner. His first care was to take, with Ben's aid, the turtle from the boat, and then to fasten the little craft securely astern where she might readily be reached, for no one could say how soon she would be required for the safety of those on board the disabled brig.

After that had been done the Sea Queen's cook busied himself with putting the partially shattered galley in working order, and while he was thus engaged Ben went into the cabin to learn whether the old negress was making Gertie comfortable.

This portion of the brig offered a striking contrast to the deck, where everything told of disaster. The lamps had been lighted, and the interior wore a cheerful, home-like look that went very far toward dispelling the boy's gloomy thoughts caused by Jake's dismal croaking.

The saloon was as large as an ordinary room, with four doors leading to as many state-rooms on either side, and, according to Ben's ideas, furnished with an unusual degree of elegance, although had he been more familiar with vessels of the Simoon's class he would not have been surprised at what he saw. A long dining-table with revolving, upholstered chairs, ran nearly the entire length of the apartment, and over it were two swinging lamps with silvered reflectors. Between the state-room doors were sofas, and the panels of the walls and ceiling were brilliant with gilt and inlaid woods of various colors. A thick carpet on the floor, partially hidden by canvas coverings, the brass plates on the companion-way stairs, and the swinging trays of glasses, which sparkled in the light of the lamps that swayed slowly to and fro as the wreck

rose and fell sluggishly on the swell of the waves, made up such a picture as Master Clark thought very beautiful.

Despite the glitter and color of the saloon, there were the same palpable evidences of disaster as could be seen on deck. The carpet was soaked with water which had entered the cabin while the brig was on her beam ends, many of the glasses were broken, some of the furniture was badly discolored, and the open doors of the state-rooms disclosed wearing apparel swinging on the walls in a suggestively mournful way when viewed in connection with the surroundings.

It is not to be supposed that Ben took note of all these things when he first descended the stairs; he simply surveyed the place in a hasty manner, and then his attention was centered upon the two who were seated at the after end of the table.

The old woman had learned from Gertie the particulars of the capture of the turtle and the disaster which befell the little party, and had at once set about providing her with a lunch, of which the child partook as if she had been without food for forty-eight instead of only six hours. The sense of companionship, after having been so long alone, cheered the solitary passenger of the Simoon quite as much as the knowledge of temporary safety had the child, and the two looked as happy as if they were making a voyage for pleasure on a sound, fully-officered ship.

"Sit down and have something to eat, Ben," Gertie said as the boy entered. "It is much nicer here than on the Sea Queen, for that man isn't aboard, and Mammy Chloe knows where there are lots of good things."

"Come an' fill yourself up, honey. Bress de Lawd, we'se got 'nuff to eat, an' bymeby we'se all gwine to toddle up Savannah streets lookin' jes' as fat as 'possums."

"Jake is out in the galley rattling the pots an' kettles as if he was cookin' dinner for an hundred, and I guess I'll wait for the second table," Ben said merrily as he seated himself very stiffly on one of the sofas, moving his body up and down to test the elasticity of the springs. "I say, Gertie, this is regularly swell, ain't it? It seems as if we could go on living here just as long as we wanted to, an' have an awful good time into the bargain, but Jake says if the wind blows hard we'll be in a bad mess."

"It's wicked for him to hunt up trouble," Gertie said indignantly. "I'm sure we would be safer here in a storm than on the little boat, and besides, we should have been awfully thirsty if we hadn't found this vessel."

Just at this moment the cook's voice was heard from the deck, as he sung in anything rather than a mournful tone:

"For I'm the mate an' the captain, too,
And the cook of the Simoon brig;
I'm the midship mite an' the bo'sun tight,
And the crew of the captain's gig."

"He can't be worried very much to sing like that," Gertie said as the sound of the voice was drowned by a furious clatter of pans, much as if a whole load of tinware had suddenly been thrown on the deck. "No one would begin to cook and make such horrid noises if the danger was very great."

"You'se safe 'nuff now, chile, so don't fuss 'bout anything what ain't right afore you," old Chloe said, as she brought more dishes from the pantry and insisted on Ben sitting at the table, regardless of the elaborate meal which Jake was supposed to be preparing.

It was half an hour before the cook had ready such a supper as he thought necessary, and when he brought it into the cabin he was the only one who could appreciate it, for the others no longer felt the need of anything save sleep.

Old Chloe had made up a bed for Gertie in the room adjoining hers, and when the child's head began to fall because of the weight of slumber pressing upon the eyelids, the negress led her from the table, leaving Jake and Ben to discuss the situation alone.

"Well, matey," the cook asked as, having concluded his hearty meal, he polished his mouth vigorously on his shirt-sleeve and sat resting both elbows on the table, looking with evident satisfaction at his surroundings, "will you an' me turn in, leaving the old hooker to navigate herself, or will we stump the deck all night like we was keepin' watch so's to give the poor, tired crew a chance for a long snooze?"

"I'm willin' to stay up all night if it is necessary," Ben replied promptly, although he looked as if sleep was the one particular thing he needed just then.

"We'll take a squint around," Jake said, rising from the table after having gazed at the food as if undecided whether he should make another effort to eat more. "If the smother is as thick as it was when I come below, I don't know as we can do any good by standin' watch, though I 'spose we might hang out some lanterns."

When the two went on deck they found that there was a decided change in the weather. Owing to the darkness, the fog appeared to be as dense as when it had first covered the waters of the gulf, but a breeze was springing up and already were the waves putting on their white caps as they dashed against the cutwater of the helpless vessel.

The cook no longer made any pretensions to being either the “captain or mate of the Simoon brig,” but walked silently forward and then aft in a manner which gave Ben to understand that he was seriously troubled in mind.

“You ain’t going to fuss because this little breeze has come, are you?” Ben asked anxiously. “Perhaps it’ll blow the fog away; but I don’t see that it can do anything worse.”

“So long as it holds like this things will be snug enough,” Jake replied slowly, “but if it keeps on growin’, as I reckon it will, we shall have too much before mornin’. You see, we can’t do anything toward helpin’ the old craft along; first, ’cause we don’t know where the land lays, an’ second, on account of our not bein’ sailors such as can make a full-rigged ship with a jackknife an’ a piece of pine wood.”

“Then if we can’t do anything we may as well wait till it gets really bad before we cry,” Ben said, with an attempt at cheerfulness.

“I s’pose you’re right,” the cook replied sadly. “You go below an’ turn into one of the empty bunks while I keep a little watch here all by myself.”

“If there is anything to do I don’t want to go to sleep.”

“You might just as well as to stay here, for there is really no work for anybody.”

Having thus been assured that he was not needed on deck, and feeling quite positive that Jake’s delight in melancholy rather than the true state of affairs caused these evil forebodings, Ben went into the cabin. All the sleeping apartments, save the two occupied by old Chloe and Gertie, were open, and he made a critical examination of each before deciding which to use. The after one on the starboard side was the largest and looked the most inviting, and this he entered without thought that it might be well to take the dishes from the table, or extinguish one of the lamps.

Partially undressing himself he laid down in the wide berth, and before he had time to speculate as to what might be the result of this cruise in a water-logged vessel, he was in the land of Nod, too weary even to dream.

Meanwhile Jake was on deck with genuine fear in his heart. Although having sailed many years as a cook he was far from being a seaman, and the

knowledge that if he knew how he might do something toward averting danger in case of a storm, only served to make him more anxious. He succeeded in finding two lanterns, which he lashed to the splintered ends of the masts, and after this had been done he paced to and fro on the deck as if believing that by so doing he would be able to prevent any serious disaster.

The wind was rapidly increasing in force, and the fog had been so nearly dispersed that he could see the sky, across which heavy clouds were hurrying, like couriers of the coming storm. The motion of the wreck was fast becoming violent, and the waves had already grown so high as to dash, now and then, over the shattered rail when the heavily-laden vessel could not rise with the swell.

Jake lighted the binnacle-lamp that he might see the compass, and from it learned that the wind was blowing out of the northwest, inclining rather more to the westward, and this knowledge had the effect of increasing rather than allaying his fears, for he knew that the wreck might be carried past the chain of keys into the open sea.

"The old hooker can't live through many storms," he muttered to himself as he closed the forecabin hatch and made preparations for sounding the bell again. "If this wind holds strong two or three days we'll find ourselves knockin' about with precious little chance of bein' picked up, unless we should have the good luck to strike the Cuban shore. If land is in sight at sunrise, an' the sea isn't kickin' up too much of a bobbery, I believe the best thing we can do is to take our chances in the small boat."

Having expressed this opinion to himself he went, from sheer force of habit, into the galley, remaining there even after the deck was awash and the wreck plunging violently about as the waves struck heavy blows which caused her to tremble from stem to stern.

In the cabin Gertie, Ben, and possibly old Chloe, were sleeping soundly, heeding not the increased rolling of the hulk until it was forced up by a wave and allowed to fall into the abyss of waters, when the dishes were thrown from the table with a terrible clatter, and everything movable was flung from one side to the other, crashing against the swinging doors or rolling into the open rooms.

The uproar was so great that, weary though at least two of the occupants of the cabin were, all three were out of their berths in an instant, darting into the saloon in the belief that the brig had been run down or struck a rock.

“What is the matter?” Gertie cried in alarm as Ben rushed from the room aft of hers and darted toward the companion-way. “Is the vessel sinking?”

“I don’t know,” was the hurried reply. “I’m going to find Jake.”

“You needn’t go any further, for I’m coming down.”

As he spoke the cook descended the stairs, arriving at the foot just as old Aunt Chloe came from her room at full speed, and as the two were moving directly toward each other when the vessel lurched again, they quite naturally came in collision.

The shock was sufficient to throw both to the floor, but neither Gertie or Ben saw anything comical in the unintentional encounter, as would have been the case under other circumstances, for they were so thoroughly frightened that they had no thought save for their own danger.

After the cook scrambled to his feet he explained the cause of the confusion, so far as the movements of the vessel was concerned, but he could say nothing to cheer the anxious ones.

“A storm has come up, an’ the seas are breakin’ clean over us, owin’ to our bein’ broadside to the wind. There isn’t a thing we can do to help ourselves, an’ we’ve got to sit here an’ take what comes.”

The shrieking of the wind, the angry blows of the waves against the helpless craft, and the swash of the water as it swept to and fro on the deck, could plainly be heard by those in the cabin, telling of the danger to which they were exposed. The full extent of the peril was now apparent even to old Chloe, and she clasped Ben and Gertie in her arms as she crouched on the floor alternately sobbing and praying.

The Castaways — Chapter VII

The Reef

Even had the occupants of the Simoon's cabin been assured that the vessel's hull was strong enough to successfully withstand the angry blows of the water, and had they known that all the chances were in the brig's favor during the progress of the storm, which was now fully upon them, their situation would have been one of anxiety and terror, tossed about as they were at the mercy of the wind and wave, without power to guide the helpless craft. Instead, however, of being assured of their ultimate safety, the little party had every reason to believe that the wreck could not long remain afloat if the sea continued boisterous, and the one fact uppermost in the mind of each was that at any moment the hulk might sink like a stone, with no possible chance that the lives of those on board could be saved.

Perhaps the timbers did not creak and groan any more than would have been the case had the vessel been uninjured and sailing buoyantly over the waves guided by skillful hands; but to the terrified ones the straining of the planks sounded as if each separate piece was being wrenched from its fellow, and more than once when an unusually heavy sea came aboard did they glance at the companion-way, expecting to see the water pouring in upon them.

Their fears were allayed in some slight degree after an hour had passed and the brig continued to float. In their minds came the thought that if she had ridden the waves thus far, however sluggishly, it might be possible she would continue to do so until aid in some form should come.

During this time they had remained motionless as when terror dealt the first blow--old Chloe on her knees with Gertie and Ben tightly clasped to her bosom, and Jake crouching on the brass-covered stairs. When in his despair came a gleam of hope to the cook, he started up the companion-way quickly, as if he expected he could see through the blackness which was rendered more dense and bewildering by the flying spray and rain.

"Don't go, Jake! Don't leave us here!" Ben cried, not realizing for the moment that it was impossible for the man to go very far away.

"I only wanted to see how things looked from the deck," Jake replied as he halted at the door, and in the briefest possible space of time he understood

that it would be in the highest degree dangerous to make any attempt at going forward.

The seas were dashing entirely over the vessel, and had the companion-way opened toward the bow instead of the stern, the cabin would long since have been filled with water.

"I s'pose I might as well stay here," and Jake seated himself on the stairs. "Jest for a minute I thought something could be done; but it's blacker outside than a pocket, an' a man who'd try to go for'ed would be swept overboard."

"If Captain Irwin would only find us now!" Gertie cried, and any hope of escape she might have had from the coming of the schooner was dispelled by the cook, who said in a tone of despair:

"It wouldn't do a bit of good if she was within hail this very minute. They couldn't reach us any more'n we could them."

"They might come in the long-boat," Ben suggested.

"She couldn't be lowered without swampin', an' Captain Irwin knows too much to try such a job. The only chance we've got is that this old hulk will live through the gale, an' not be blown too far out to sea."

After this the little party relapsed into silence, save when old Chloe bewailed her fate at having left Savannah, or exclaimed in anger because her "Moses" had persuaded her "to go up Norf." Now and then Gertie would take Ben's hands in hers, as if to cheer him, or he would stroke her hair to show that he still considered himself her protector, even though it was now so impossible to extend any aid. Jake remained on the stairs glancing up apprehensively every time the waves struck an unusually heavy blow, and on two occasions making an unsuccessful attempt to reach the deck.

With almost painful slowness the minutes passed, and it was not yet midnight when Gertie believed it was time for the sun to rise. Then kindly sleep came to the relief of the old woman and the two children, and partially sitting, partially lying on the floor the three were lost to consciousness of the danger which menaced, while Jake played the part of a very ill-favored guardian angel as he sat above them keeping useless watch while the wind, the sea and the grinding of the vessel's timbers made hideous confusion.

The dawn had not yet appeared when the storm-tossed hulk sunk down into the waters as if about to take the last plunge, and Jake grasped more firmly the rail of the stair-way, believing the end had finally come. How long this downward motion continued before she began to rise again, he had no idea; he was only conscious that she had ceased to settle and was being lifted

once more, and the fear of immediate death which had come upon him was hardly gone before it returned. Up, up the water-laden vessel was carried, until it seemed as if her bow must be directly above her stern, and then there was a swift, sickening onward rush that ended with a crash which hurled the sleepers to the forward end of the cabin, throwing Jake directly upon them.

It was nearly a minute before any one could understand what had caused this sudden change of position, and then Jake said, as he rose to his feet after extricating himself with difficulty from old Chloe's detaining grasp:

"We have struck the land somewhere, and it's a little comfort to know there's a solid substance underneath us, even if we never get ashore."

The Simoon was now motionless; the waves were striking against her with a force that could plainly be felt by the frightened ones; but she no longer rose or fell on the angry waters--there was a feeling of solidity about her which did very much toward allaying the fears of those who were in such peril. For the moment there was no question whether the hulk could remain intact against the blows of the sea; but all believed they were freed from any immediate danger.

"Where do you suppose we are?" Gertie asked, and the cook replied with something like his former sadness:

"I don't know. It's satisfaction enough to feel that she has grounded without asking for anything more. We may be on an island, an' then agin we may have struck a reef; but wherever she is, we ain't likely to sink any deeper 'till the waves break her to pieces."

"Couldn't we learn anything by going on deck?" Gertie asked, for the idea of waiting in fear lest the brig should be stove was but a trifling degree less unpleasant than remaining in suspense while the helpless vessel was being driven on by the storm.

It was yet dark, and the pounding of the waves upon the deck could still be heard. It would be impossible to make out the position of the brig even if one could remain above long enough to take a survey of the surroundings.

"All we can do is to stay where we are until it is light," Jake replied, "and we sha'n't have long to wait, for it's pretty near sunrise."

In this the cook was correct, for the first gray light of the coming day could be seen in the cabin before an hour had passed, although to the anxious ones it appeared as if nearly half the night elapsed from the time Jake spoke until dawn paled the flame of the lamps.

It seemed as if the coming of the sun had broken the force of the gale, for when it was possible to discern surrounding objects the sea had so far subsided that there was no danger in going on deck. The towering waves continued to dash against the wreck with a force that threatened momentarily to rend the timbers, but the waters no longer swept fore and aft in irresistible torrents, as had been the case when the doomed vessel struck upon the reef.

Jake was the first to ascend the stairs. Following him came Ben, grasping Gertie tightly by the hand, as she in turn had a firm hold of old Chloe, who had been literally speechless with fear during the past two hours, and whose face was of that peculiar greyish hue which terror paints upon a black skin.

The first glimpse which the shipwrecked ones had of their surroundings was neither encouraging nor particularly disheartening. They were no longer in danger of immediate death, but might be obliged to remain where they were many days, during which time they would undoubtedly suffer some discomforts if not actual privations.

The Simoon had struck a reef which extended along one side of a very small coral island or key, on which a dozen mangrove trees represented the entire vegetation. She lay with her stern raised slightly higher than the bow, and her port side exposed to the seas, which were yet curling angrily and ominous-looking as they chased each other in the race to the doomed vessel, and from her to the shore, which was hardly more than two hundred yards away.



"It doesn't appear like such an awfully jolly place, but it's a long ways ahead of an open boat in a fog," Ben said, after the little party had gazed several minutes in silence at the glistening white sand of the tiny island. "As soon as the sea gets smooth we can start in search of Key West."

As he spoke, all hands instinctively glanced astern where it was supposed the Sea Queen's tender was still moored, but nothing could be seen. One end of the painter was made fast to a belaying-pin, and Jake ran quickly toward it, hauling in on the rope until a small fragment of shattered timber to which the ring-bolt was attached had been brought to view.

"We might a' known that any kind of a boat would a' been stove in them seas," he exclaimed bitterly, "an' I was such a fool as to think she was holdin' fast an' sound."

"Shall we have to stay on this vessel?" Gertie asked in a tremulous voice, for the pounding of the waves against the side of the brig was sufficient to give the impression that the hull could not long withstand the continued assault.

"It won't be such a very hard matter to go ashore after the sea gets quiet," Jake replied as he dropped the now useless rope and gazed around, "but when we're on that bit of sand we'll have to stay there, for I don't reckon we could do much sailin' with a raft."

"We ought to be mighty thankful that the 'bit of sand,' as you call it, is so near," Ben said cheerfully, as he crept cautiously around the starboard side of the deck-house in order to get a better view of the island.

It is quite probable that Jake was thankful at having a place of refuge, however small, close at hand, but he could not resist the desire to indulge in the pleasure of appearing sad, and one would have believed from the look on his face that every hope had departed.

The sight of the land had lifted old Chloe from out the slough of despair into which she had so long been plunged, and the grayish hue gave place to shining black as she feasted her eyes, which had for so many days been accustomed to the heaving billows, upon the waving leaves and glittering sand.

"Bress de Lawd, it's big 'nuff to stan' on and looks gooder'n a hunerd ships. I'se done gone ready to leave dis yer crazy vessel."

"All right, aunty," Jake replied in a melancholy tone, "you shall be there before sunset, an' by the time you get all tied up with the rheumatiz along o' layin' on the wet sand, you'll be mighty glad to see the smallest turtlin' schooner that ever come nosin' round this forsaken place. You an' Gertie 'tend to gettin' something for breakfast while we try our hands at raft buildin'."

Chloe was perfectly willing to do anything which would forward the preparations for landing, and she immediately went into the pantry, followed by Gertie. During the storm the remnants of the galley had been washed away, therefore the task which the cook of the Sea Queen had set for the old woman was not easy of accomplishment unless breakfast was to be served cold.

If Chloe's portion of the labor was difficult, that which Jake and Ben were to perform was doubly so, owing to the fact that every movable thing on deck, including the turtle, which was the remote cause of three of the party being in such trouble, had been swept overboard, and materials sufficient for building a raft were not easily found.

The cook had already indulged in mourning to quite an extent, therefore he had nothing with which to occupy his mind save the task in question, and he set about it with a will. At the expense of some considerable labor the main hatches were removed and lashed together, after having been placed on the starboard side near where the rail was stove, in order that they might be easily launched, and on them were fastened doors from the cabin and such other buoyant articles as could most readily be procured.

The labor was interrupted only by a summons to a cold breakfast and afterward to dinner, and at three o'clock in the afternoon all was in readiness for the trip to the shore. The waves were running high, yet not to such an extent but that the passage could be made in safety, and Jake called all hands on deck as soon as the rude craft had been pushed into the water.

The Castaways — Chapter VIII

On The Key

Jake's preparations for landing were very carefully made. The brig was held firmly by the reef, with no danger of sinking, and it had been possible to work to the greatest advantage, except so far as lack of proper material was concerned.

The raft was a heavy, unwieldy-looking affair, but it had the merit of being sufficiently buoyant to float the shipwrecked party and a certain amount of stores which were to be taken ashore on the first trip. In the lazarette Jake found a new top-gallant sail, as well as a couple of bolts of canvas, and these he had loaded onto the clumsy craft at first, for the duty of putting up some kind of a shelter to protect them from the sun during the day and the dew at night was of the greatest importance. A small breaker of water, some canned meat and a box of biscuit made up the list of provisions, which Ben thought very scanty until the cook explained his plans.

"The weather has got a settled look now, an' the old hooker will hold together until another storm comes on. We shall have plenty of time to freight ashore all the things we need, so it's not necessary to load our Dutch style of clipper too deep on the first trip. What we've got here will serve until mornin' in case we don't have a chance to come back before sunset, so we sha'n't be very near starvation."

Some spare rope to lash down the tent, which was to be made of the sail, and an ax comprised the remainder of the first load. It was not until after all these had been carefully stowed, and one end of a coil of rope made fast to the timbers, with the other end secured to the capstan, that the passengers were invited on board.

When old Chloe looked down from the rail at the raft, her desire to go on shore was greatly lessened. She was well aware how much flesh she possessed, and was positive her weight alone would be sufficient to sink the "clipper."

"I'se powerful willin' to leave dis yere vessel dat's broke hisself mos' to pieces, fo' a fac', but dat ar' little pile of wood'll smash all up when ole Chloe jumps on it."

"Don't fret about that, aunty," Jake said impatiently. "It'll hold a dozen just like you, an' we can't fool round here very long if we want to land before dark."

"I can't trus' my ole bones on dese yere little pieces ob wood," and the old woman looked at the cook much as if surprised that he did not immediately begin to remedy the defects she had pointed out.

"Then you'll have to stay here. I ain't sure but the brig will be as good a place to sleep in as a tent on the island, but I didn't want to run the risk of a storm comin' up in the night. Gertie, you an' Ben jump aboard, an' perhaps when we come back aunty will be ready to take her chances on the raft."

This remark, which sounded in the old woman's ears very like a threat, was sufficient to conquer her fear of the frail-looking craft, and she waddled toward the rail with a martyr-like expression on her face, as she said in a doleful tone:

"I'se gwine wid you, Massa Jake, an' I'se gwine fo' to git drowneded suah."

"You're to be landed on that island, an' you don't begin to stand as many chances of seein' Davy Jones' locker as you have any day since the brig was dismantled."

"I'se got nuffin' to do wid Massa Jones, 'less he's a Savannah gen'leman, kase den he'd know how to treat a po' ole nigger woman," Chloe replied stiffly as she peered down into the water, and Gertie did her best to soothe the wounded feelings by saying as she took the wrinkled, black hand in hers:

"There isn't any danger, aunty, for if there was Jake wouldn't ask us to go. All you have to do is get aboard the raft, and in a few moments we shall be on the land once more."

"Bress you, chile, dat's whar I pines to be; but I don' wanten hab my po' ole bones drowneded a-gettin' dere."

"Hold on to me an' I'll let you down like as if you was a big basket of eggs," Jake said as he grasped the old woman firmly by the arms, and in a short time, thanks to Ben's timely aid, she was crouching on the canvas, hardly daring to move her head lest the raft should be overturned; but all the while moaning and groaning as if she truly believed the time of her death was very near at hand.

In a few seconds the other members of the party had left the brig, and Ben and Jake were tugging manfully at the long sweeps as they propelled the unwieldy mass of timbers toward the shore. The rope which was attached to the raft and the Simoon's capstan, slowly paid out as the cook's "clipper" forged sluggishly ahead, and decidedly retarded the progress; but neither of the rowers made any complaint because of this, for after it had once been

stretched from the wreck to the shore it would be a slight task to pull the rude craft to and fro.

Gertie was rather timid when she first stepped upon this apology for a ferry-boat, but as it floated several inches out of water after all hands were on board, her fears took flight, and she was the only merry one of that sad-visaged party. Old Chloe lost none of the terror which assailed her when she first saw the raft; the martyr-like expression never left her face until after the hatches grated upon the sand of the key, and she had been forced to wade through several inches of water to the shore.

Then, however, the old woman gave way to the most extravagant demonstrations of joy. She executed a sort of elephantine dance until she was forced to cease from lack of breath, and she embraced Gertie and Ben with a fervor that was really painful because of the strength of her arms. She acted very much as if about to bestow the same attention upon Jake, but he baffled any attempt of that kind by gathering up the canvas and starting off toward the center of the island.

"I'se done gone lef' off gwine to sea, honey," she said to Gertie, as the latter began to help Ben carry the canned provisions high up on the beach beyond the reach of the waves. "Ef Moses wants for to see his ole mammy he's got to come in de steam-keers after her."

"Why, this is an island like Robinson Crusoe's, aunty, and there are no steam-cars near here. We've got to stay until some vessel comes and takes us away."

"Den I s'pects I'se got to wash fur some ob de folks what lives hyar ef I wants enuff to eat, 'less dat good-fur-nothin' Mose sends some money, for I 'clar to goodness I ain't gwine out on de water any mo'."

"You can start a laundry, and we'll all give you our trade," Ben said laughingly; "but I don't believe the others we shall find here will help you along much, for the turtles down this way haven't got in the habit of using handkerchiefs or stockings."

Chloe looked at him wonderingly for a moment, but before she could make any reply Jake shouted:

"Come on, Ben, an' help me stretch this canvas, for I want to get back to the brig again before dark."

The cook had selected a spot between two mangroves as the site for the camp, since from this point an unobstructed view could be had of the gulf, and in a short time the sail was spread in such a manner as to form a slanting roof

with two ends, and a flap which could be let down over the front in case of a storm. The bolts of canvas were unrolled for a carpet, the water-breaker and bread-box set up in one corner, and the camp was completed.

As a dwelling it did not boast of many modern conveniences. The air of comfort apparent in the cabin of the Simoon was wholly lacking, but it was a remarkably good shelter for shipwrecked people, and those who were to occupy it believed they had every cause to be thankful that the sea had allowed them to save so much.

"I reckon that will make a right nice shanty for us unless we get introduced to a tornado or a norther," Jake said in a tone of satisfaction as he stepped back a few paces to survey his work. "Now, you women folks can do whatever you want to while me an' Ben pull back to the brig."

"What are you going there for now?" Gertie asked in surprise.

"We've got plenty of time to make another trip before dark, an' as there's no tellin' how soon the wreck may slide off into deep water, we must save what we can while she's on the reef."

Ben recognized the necessity of immediate and unremitting action, and he started at once for the shore, Gertie calling after him:

"Be sure to bring a pot to make tea in, or else Mammy Chloe will be going out to buy one. She says she can't stay if she don't have something warm to drink."

"Rather than have her leave sudden-like we'll get whatever she wants," Jake shouted cheerily, his usual look of melancholy taking flight for the instant before old Chloe's threat of leaving the island.

The small hawser which had been dragged ashore was made fast to the nearest tree, and over it was passed the bight or middle of a rope, after which the two ends were secured to the raft. There was now no danger that the ferry-boat would drift away while the wreck remained in its present condition, and the timbers could be easily and quickly moved through the water.

The return to the brig was soon effected, and after the raft had been fastened alongside, the work of taking out supplies was begun. Acting upon Jake's suggestion, Ben occupied himself with putting into the smallest possible compass such of the bedding from the state-rooms as would suffice for Gertie and old Chloe, and when that was done he brought from the steward's pantry all the packages of provisions which could be most readily transported.

For his share of the work the cook had taken from the carpenter's room a few tools, a small quantity of cooking utensils from the lazarette, and a collection of odds and ends such as Ben thought not worth the labor of carrying away.

The one thing lacking to make up a plentiful supply was water, and of that the small breaker which had been taken ashore on the first trip was all that could be found. There was undoubtedly sufficient of the precious fluid in the hold, but the labor of getting at it would be more than Jake and Ben could perform in a week.

"We've got about as much as the clipper will carry dry," the cook said after his vain search for more water was brought to a close, "an' we may as well start. To-morrow we'll come early, an' I reckon something drinkable will be found before the day is ended."

When all the goods were loaded the raft was so deep in the water that but very little more would have been needed to sink her beneath the surface. As it was, the waves broke over the timbers several times during the passage to the shore, greatly to the detriment of some of the provisions.

Gertie and Chloe were on the beach when the wreckers arrived, and did their share toward transferring the goods from the raft to the camp, otherwise the task would not have been accomplished until after the darkness had settled down over the tiny island. The night came when the weary castaways were finally seated in front of the canvas shelter enjoying the rest all so sadly needed.

Great as was old Chloe's desire for tea, it could not be satisfied on this day, for it was too late to hunt for materials with which to make a fire, and another cold meal was partaken of with the promise from Jake that on the following day "aunty" should have all the hot drinks she wanted.

"Only agree that you won't go away from this key to-night, an' I'll stir myself right smart to-morrow to fix up a place where some cooking can be done," Jake said, and old Chloe gravely and seriously promised to remain with the party under those conditions.

The bedding was spread beneath the canvas, and there was enough to make Jake and Ben quite comfortable in the corner of the camp which they had chosen as their own. The goods which might be injured by moisture were piled under the shelter, and Jake had proposed that "all hands turn in," when the old negress said solemnly:

“De Lawd God ob Israel hab brought us up outer de waters same’s He did His chillern from de Red Sea, an’ it ’pears like we’d oughter jes’ let Him know we wasn’t ongrateful trash what forgets all about Him when dere ain’t nuffin’ to git scared over.”

There was a perfect silence for some moments, during which Gertie laid her hand on the black fingers, and then Jake, after moving uneasily around, said:

“I reckon you’re right, aunty, an’ if you want to put in a word or two for me, seein’s how sich an old shell-back as I am has kinder got outer the way of prayin’, I’ll agree to everything you say, an’ thank you.”

Chloe did not stop for any mental preparation. Her heart was overflowing with thanksgiving because of the peril which she had so happily escaped, and from the fullness of it did the words flow freely.

Kneeling on the sand just outside the tent, the others in the same position around her, with no covering save God’s jewel-studded sky, and no noise to break the stillness save the sobbing of the waters held in “the hollow of His hand,” the black woman gave thanks to her Maker in speech that did not sound faulty because of the devotion which made the trembling voice seem clear and sweet.

The Castaways — Chapter IX

A Midnight Visitor

The castaways kept no watch during this night on their island home, and for two very good reasons. They knew that there was no other person on the key, and, that being the case, there was no one against whom they should stand guard. In event of a sudden storm no further precautions could be taken, and Jake and Ben, who slept near the front of the camp, would be awakened by the first dash of rain, which was all that was necessary.

Therefore it was that the little party laid down to sleep as soon as Aunt Chloe's prayer was ended, and no one thought of possible evil. The key was so small that a single glance was sufficient to reveal the probable fact of its being uninhabited by man or any other animal larger than a mouse, and the castaways felt the most perfect sense of security as they gave themselves up to the slumber which weighed so heavily upon their eyelids.

When her devotions were ended old Chloe complained long and bitterly because she had been deprived of her tea, and declared that she would not be able to "sleep a wink" until after drinking two or three cups of Young Hyson, but even while she grumbled and scolded, her eyes had closed, not to be opened until all the occupants of the camp were suddenly startled into wakefulness.

How long he had been in the land of Nod before he was aroused in a fright by a loud shouting, Ben could form no idea. When he had lost consciousness the regular breathing of Gertie and old Chloe told that they were already in the region of dreams, and Jake was stretched out by his side, yawning every few moments as if his head was about to fly asunder. Then came a time when he may possibly have been dimly conscious of resting, and suddenly a loud outcry that caused him to spring to his feet at the same instant he opened his eyes.

"What's the matter?" he shouted, trying in vain to peer into the tent, and as he repeated the question an exclamation of mingled surprise and fear from the female members of the party told that they were not the cause of the noise which had aroused the camp.

"Come here, Ben! Come quick or we'll lose him!" was heard in an imperative tone from the beach, and there was no difficulty in recognizing the voice as belonging to the ex-cook of the Sea Queen.

Full of wonder that Jake should be so far away from home when he was as much in need of rest as any one, Ben started at full speed in the direction from which the summons had been heard, shouting as he ran:

“All right; I’m coming!”

The moon shone round and bright in the heavens, causing the white sand to glisten but little less than at noonday, and lighting up every portion of the island, save where the trees cast black shadows, until the smallest object could easily be discerned.

Before Ben had taken a dozen steps he was beyond the line of mangroves, and could see far up on the beach the form of Jake alternately bending over a huge round object and running to and fro as if he had suddenly taken leave of his senses.

It was not until he was close upon the cook that he could make out what had occurred, and then everything was readily understood.

Jake was doing his best to prevent a large turtle from scuttling away into the water, by running in front of him, making a hideous outcry, and trying from time to time to turn him on his back.

“Come on an’ help me tip this feller over!” the cook shouted as soon as he saw Ben. “He must weigh three or four hundred pounds, an’ I’ve pretty nigh pulled the arms out of me tryin’ to put him on his back. I’ve been yellin’ to waken some of you people for the last half-hour, an’ had begun to think I’d have to give up the job, for he’s gettin’ mighty close to the water.”

Ben had never had any experience in the work of turning turtles, but he had heard enough about it to know that he could approach either side or the rear of the huge shell without fear of injury, and he laid hold with a will, the sand flying in every direction as the turtle was finally laid on his back just as old Chloe came running up breathless and excited.

The sight of the captive prevented any necessity for questions; but yet it did not tell the whole story of what Jake had seen that night, for he ran along the beach a short distance, and when he returned he had his hat nearly full of small, white eggs.

“Where did you get them?” Gertie screamed in delight as the cook held one in the air that there might be no question as to the nature of this latest addition to their larder.

“The turtle left ’em here not half an hour ago,” Jake replied in a tone of pride because of his success. “I was jest fallin’ off to sleep when I ’spied her crawlin’ up out of the water, an’ I knew pretty nigh what she was about. I crept

after her as quiet as a cat goes for a mouse, an' waited 'till she'd made her nest an' filled it. Then I tried to tip her over, but the job was a little too much, an' I had to yell for Ben."

Old Chloe and the cook were delighted with the capture; but Master Clark did not think it a matter which called for any very great amount of rejoicing. Had they been in want of food he would have felt as highly elated as any one; but as it was, they had sufficient for many weeks, and he did not consider a turtle, however large, anything particularly valuable.

"We'll live like lords for two or three days," Jake said, looking at the eggs much as if he was tempted to make an omelette even at that late hour, "an' after we have cleaned the shells I reckon we can contrive to rig up a well that will keep us supplied with water."

The cook did not explain how this could be done; but he appeared to be so positive of success that to the others the turtle increased rapidly in value, until all regarded it as a veritable prize.

Nearly half an hour was spent in commenting upon the captive and her eggs, and then the little party retired to their canvas house, where their slumbers were undisturbed until the sun peeped over the world of waters at the tiny key which had so suddenly and unexpectedly been peopled.

The chief work of the day was to be rafting goods from the wreck to the shore, but before this was begun Jake killed the turtle and separated the shells that old Chloe might make a soup for dinner. Ben gathered quite a large pile of wood, and promised to bring something from the brig which could be made to serve as a fire-place. The tea-famished negress succeeded in brewing several cups of her favorite beverage for breakfast by building a small fire on the sand directly under the pot, and after the morning meal was ended the entire party went down to the beach.

The water inside the reef was as calm as a mill-pond, and even outside there was not a ripple on the glassy surface, which slowly rose and fell in long undulations that struck the side of the wreck in a lazy manner, as if too indolent to raise the slightest line of foam.

Gertie was eager to pay one more visit to the Simoon, and urged old Chloe to take passage on the raft; but without avail. The mother of Moses could not be persuaded to trust her precious body on the small pile of timbers, even though assured that she might be of great assistance in collecting such articles as would be useful while they were forced to remain on the key. During the night she had begun to understand that they were virtually prisoners on the

narrow strip of sand, and that she could not succeed in going away when she chose any more than she could get employment from the inhabitants of their place of refuge. She realized the possible horrors of her situation, and yet if Jake had decided that it would be better to take to the raft in the hope of reaching some port, it is extremely probable she would have preferred to remain alone on the key rather than venture on the sea which had caused her so much suffering.

Therefore her reply to Gertie's proposition was a decided negative. She seated herself in the shade of the mangrove which grew nearest the beach, and the others started on the raft toward the wreck, propelling their craft easily by pulling on the heavy hawser.

Despite the heat, which was growing more intense each moment, the morning was an enjoyable one; the faint, salt-laden breeze which came over the ocean was invigorating, and the castaways were too full of animal spirits to dwell long upon what might ultimately be their fate in case the key was situated in such shoal water that vessels would not be likely to call there.

"Where do you suppose we are, Jake?" Ben asked as he and the cook pulled at the hawser while Gertie sat Turk fashion on the highest portion of the timbers.

"That's jest what I've been tryin' to figger out ever since the old hooker struck the reef. I've often seen a chart of the Florida Straits, an' I don't remember of any island standin' by itself between Key West and the Tortugas. Of course we couldn't a' drifted on to the Cuban coast, an' the only way I can fix it in my mind is that we're to the east'ard of the Nor'west Channel."

"Would that bring us in the track of ships?"

"No; we're clean off the course of everything unless it is the turtle-fishers who sneak among all these keys in the reg'lar season, which is pretty nigh over now. After we get through the job of wreckin' we'll look around our plantation a bit, an' if we can see other small islands south of here, we may make up our minds that we're not so very far from Cape Sable."

"Where do you suppose the Sea Queen is?" Gertie asked in a tone such as one uses when speaking of the dead.

"I reckon she's cruisin' 'round off the Marquesas with all hands on the look-out. It ain't likely Captain Irwin would keep on his course without havin' one try for us, though if he don't see the boat after a day or two he'll conclude that some craft has picked us up."

"You won't have to go into the quack medicine business again for quite a while," Ben said with a smile.

"I'd rather be shipwrecked on the most desolate island that ever was than go with him," Gertie replied in a decided tone. "We haven't got a bad place in which to live; but if it was cold and wretched I'd be happy because I'm away from that man."

Master Clark was not quite prepared to spend the remainder of his days on the key, but he was well content to stay there a long time in order that Gertie might be separated from her step-father, and therefore the two young castaways were in a very happy frame of mind.

The conversation was interrupted by the arrival of the raft at the wreck; and after making the guiding-loop fast to a fragment of the shattered rail, the three went on board the hulk which had proved to be such a veritable place of refuge when they were drifting helplessly on the fog-covered waters.

Jake lost no time in getting to work. His one desire was to find a supply of water, and to that end all his efforts were directed. Gertie searched through the cabin and state-rooms, as old Chloe proposed, for such articles as might be converted into clothing, and procured a quantity of sheets and bunting large enough to make quite an extensive wardrobe. Ben's first duty was to collect metal with which to build a fire-place, and after succeeding he went into the lazarette, where he found stowed in one corner, nearly hidden by a lot of cordage, three cases of lime-juice.

The cook had worked harder than either of his companions, but without accomplishing anything up to the time when Ben called to him that he and Gertie had already gathered enough to make a load for the raft.

"Can't you take it ashore?" Jake cried from the hold. "I'm working my way down through the cargo----"

He was interrupted, and the children were positively terrified, by a succession of piercing screams from the shore. That old Chloe was in some great danger there seemed to be no doubt, but what had happened on the uninhabited island no one could imagine.

Jake was out of the hold in an instant and joined Gertie and Ben, who, with pale faces and dilated eyes, were gazing over the rail without being able to see the evident sufferer, who continued to shriek in the most frantic manner.

"Get onto the raft--never mind the goods. The old woman must have fallen overboard!"

Jake knew as he spoke that such could not be the case, for if Chloe's head was above the water, as it must have been in order to permit such an outcry, they would be able to see her. He did not stop to speculate further, however, but leaping to the raft, closely followed by Gertie and Ben, pulled desperately on the hawser, forcing the timbers through the water until it bubbled and boiled around the bow, and all the while the shrill cries of terror or distress rang out on the clear air with painful distinctness.

The Castaways — Chapter X

The Island Specter

Under other circumstances it would have been almost impossible for the three castaways to have pulled the raft ashore as quickly as they did while old Chloe's screams of terror caused them to strain every muscle, and yet it seemed as if the rude craft was barely moving through the water, so great was their anxiety.

"Where she has stowed herself away I can't make out," Jake muttered as he glanced hastily from one portion of the island to the other. "I wouldn't 'sposed a rat could a hid hisself on this place, an' yet big as she is, I can't see a sign of her anywhere."

As soon as the raft was in shoal water the cook jumped overboard and ran ashore, leaving the others to make the craft fast. The screams were so nearly incessant as to be bewildering, but so far as he could ascertain they came from the direction of the camp, and Jake made all haste toward that point.

Gertie and Ben had but just landed when their companion disappeared beneath the canvas, and they ran at full speed, arriving at the tent in time to see the cook pull old Chloe out from under the bedding, she still continuing to scream vigorously, while he cried angrily:

"What is the matter, you foolish old woman? There's nothing here to trouble you, and if that noise ain't stopped right soon I'll shut it off with my hand."

This threat had no effect upon the old negress until it had been repeated several times, and then as Gertie bent over her, she asked in a voice that was trembling with fear:

"Whar is it, chile? Whar is it?"

"What do you mean, mammy! I don't see anything here?"

"Hab it done gone for suah?" and the old woman raised herself cautiously on her elbow as she gazed earnestly in every direction.

"Was it something you saw?" Ben asked as he also searched with his eyes but discovered nothing.

"It was a ghos', honey, a ghos' all in white!"

"A ghost!" Jake repeated contemptuously. "She's gone clean crazy, for if the key ain't large enough to hold animals, I'd like to know what kind of a

chance ghosts would have. I've heerd of shipwrecked folks goin' out of their heads, an' that's what's happened to her."

Although Jake appeared so brave, it could readily be seen that he was not altogether comfortable in his mind. While speaking he looked uneasily around, and once when the sound of the raft grating on the sand was heard, loud and distinct, he started as if terrified by the noise.

Gertie and Ben gazed at each other in silent amazement. Neither had been taught to believe in such things as ghosts, and yet from the expression on the faces of both Chloe and Jake, they could not doubt but that the island had had some unearthly visitant.

"What did it look like?" Gertie asked in a low whisper.

"It was all white, chile, an' great green eyes what was terrible."

"Where was it?" Jake asked, visibly disturbed by the description of the "ghost's" eyes.

"Cluse to de water. I'se settin' dere when bang! out it come from a tree right in front ob me."

Each of those who had been called in such haste from the brig had some question to ask concerning the supposed ghost, and old Chloe gave the fullest particulars. She was positive that something white, with gleaming eyes, had leaped from the tree toward her, evidently with the intention of carrying her away, and this she stoutly maintained, regardless of the professed scepticism of her companions. After she had sufficiently recovered from her fright as to be able to sit up and sustain a connected conversation, her minute description of the unearthly visitant was so vivid that her hearers were in a very uncomfortable frame of mind.

She insisted that she would not sleep again on the key, and professed perfect willingness to trust her precious self on the raft during a trip to the wreck rather than remain where such horrible sights met her gaze, but to this Jake made the most decided objections, although it could plainly be seen that he had no especial desire to stay where ghosts might become regular visitors.

"It never'd do at all to sleep on the brig," he said. "If a storm should come up during the night we couldn't land while the sea was runnin' high, an' it wouldn't be much different from drownin' yourself, for the hulk is sure to go to pieces when the next high wind kicks up a bobbery with the water."

The cook spoke so earnestly that Chloe could not fail to be convinced of the danger attending her proposed undertaking, and yet it was not until after each member of the party had argued with her in turn that she would consent to

remain on the key. So great was her terror lest she should see the unearthly thing again, that she did not agree to even this until Gertie promised to remain close by her side during both night and day.

It was nearly noon before the excitement died away sufficiently for Ben and Jake to attend to work, and then they went back to the brig for the load which had been collected ready for removal. Gertie was bound by her promise to remain with old Chloe, but she insisted that the negress should accompany her to the shore, where the movements of those on the raft could be seen.

“Do you believe in ghosts, Jake?” Ben asked, after they had pulled so far from the beach that the conversation would not be overheard.



“I wouldn’t like to say I didn’t,” Jake replied solemnly. “I’ve known of men what have seen ’em by the dozen, an’ they could prove it, too, by showin’ the very place where the ghost walked; but none ever come to me, though I’ve given ’em lots of chances.”

“Then you think Chloe really did see one?”

“I ain’t sayin’ yes or no to that question,” was the cautious reply. “We’ve got to stay on the key till some craft comes to take us off, that’s certain, an’ it ain’t pleasant to think them things might pop up in front of you at any time, so I’m goin’ out ghost-huntin’ this very night.”

“What’ll you do if you find one?”

“Well, I’ll--I’ll--you see, Ben, I haven’t jest made up my mind what I will do to the ghost, but I’ll tell you all about it if I see one.”

Then Jake launched forth on a number of specter stories, not even ceasing when they were alongside the wreck, and he embellished each with so many attendant horrors that Ben really felt disinclined to enter the deserted cabin lest some horrible-looking object should suddenly appear before him. The cook himself was not as eager as he had been to go into the hold again in search of water, and decided that they would be accomplishing quite as much as was necessary if they took to the shore the load which had been made ready.

“It ain’t because of what that old nigger has been tellin’ that I don’t care to stay on board,” he said quickly and with suspicious earnestness, “but you see Gertie must be kinder frightened, an’ we oughter get back as quick as we can.”

To load the raft required but a short while, and in less than an hour from the time they left the shore Ben and Jake had returned, almost disappointed because Gertie did not have some horrible tale to tell of a ghost which played the same antics as when old Chloe was alone.

The goods were carried to the tent, and after this had been done the male members of the party built quite a serviceable fire-place of the odds and ends Ben brought ashore for that purpose.

“Shall we go back for another load?” Master Clark asked as soon as this work was finished, and although but a few hours previous the cook had been eager to take everything useful from the brig, he said promptly:

“I reckon the weather will hold fine a long spell yet, an’ we’ll have plenty of time to attend to that. S’posen all hands walk around the island an’ try to make out whereabouts we have been cast away? If there are small keys to the south’ard we shall know our bearin’s to a dot.”

It seemed very much as if every member of the party hailed this suggestion as a relief from their thoughts of ghosts, so quickly did they accept it, and so rapidly did they walk away from the tent.

The line of march was taken up with Jake in advance, and Ben and Gertie on either side of old Chloe. Directly across the little island they went, not ceasing to glance back furtively from time to time until they reached the opposite shore, and the cook declared he was as positive he knew where their key was situated as if he had the chart spread out before him.

"There are a lot of no account islands scattered around east of Key West," he said with the air of a man who knows he cannot be contradicted, "an' this is one of 'em. I can see as many as a dozen way down on the horizon, not countin' this rock close to us, an' that wouldn't be the case if we were anywhere near the Marquesas or the Tortugas."

"Then there are no chances that many vessels will come in this direction?" Ben said half-interrogatively, for since the advent of Chloe's ghost he was in a decided hurry to leave the island which had appeared so fair to him in the morning.

"I s'pose turtle-catchers an' sponge-fishers run in around here, but we ain't likely to see many others, for the coasters generally give this place a pretty wide berth."

This assertion was neither commented upon or doubted, for the very good reason that no other member of the party knew anything regarding the subject, and by tacit consent they started along the beach to make a circuit of their now very unpleasant place of refuge.

By following the conformation of the shore the return journey was a long one, but nothing either startling or wonderful was seen. That the supply of shell-fish, in case they should be reduced to such a diet, was sufficient for many months' wants, all could understand after this hasty examination of their island home, but they were not as interested in this as would have been the case a few hours previous, and it was with a sense of relief that they arrived at the camp.

Jake proposed that he and Chloe should make the turtle soup, and as such an arrangement would keep the castaways together, the old woman readily consented because of the companionship. But yet, despite the knowledge of the terrible "thing" which had its home upon the island, the partnership of the cooks was not harmonious. Each had different views regarding soup-making, and were equally positive that his or her plan was the best, therefore the pot was removed when, as both believed, and it was the only point upon which they had agreed, that the soup was done.

In this case too many cooks did not spoil the broth, for, as Ben said, "it was fit to set before any king that ever lived," and a hearty meal did the castaways make.

From the time this combination of dinner and supper had been eaten until nearly sunset, all the party remained near the tent, and then Jake, calling Ben to one side, whispered:

“Tim Jinks, a shipmate of mine, allers said ghosts walked ’round more lively after dark than in the day-time. Now I ain’t sayin’ as I believe what the old woman told; but if there’s any queer things on this island I want to get away from it jest as quick as I can, so I’m goin’ to hunt a bit. You can tell the others that I’ve gone out to the brig, an’ if I ain’t here by the time you want to turn in, go to sleep, for I’m bound to settle this question before I come back.”

Ben would have tried to persuade the cook to abandon his rash plan had he not spoken in such a tone of determination. As it was, he thought it wisest to remain silent, and Jake walked away looking like a man who is ready to sacrifice his life for the safety of his friends.

It was not necessary that Master Clark should tell an untruth in order to keep his companion’s secret, for neither old Chloe nor Gertie seemed to think there was anything strange in Jake’s absence; they probably fancied he had gone to the wreck, for no comment was made until after night had fully come, and then Gertie asked why he did not return.

“He said if he wasn’t back before dark we should go to bed,” Ben replied, and he carried out these instructions at once, the others following his example without delay.

An hour later the occupants of the camp were wrapped in slumber, and the cook was still absent. The moon was shining brightly, the murmur of the sea was low and sweet, and a better night for ghost hunting it would be difficult to see.

Ben was lying near the front of the tent, dreaming perhaps that he was already in command of a large ship, when he was awakened by being roughly pulled onto his feet, and at the same instant he heard Jake whisper hoarsely and excitedly:

“Come out where the women folks won’t hear.”

He obeyed this command for the very good reason that the cook literally dragged him along, and when they were twenty yards from the tent he heard a wonderful tale.

“There is a ghost on this island, lad, for I’ve jest seen it! About five minutes ago a thing all in white, with fire comin’ out of its eyes, run right at me, an’ I got back here as quick as I could. It was an awful lookin’ sight, Ben, an’ I tell you we ain’t safe on this ’ere place--we’ve got to make a move if we have to swim for it.”

The Castaways — Chapter XI

Catching The Ghost

Ben had been inclined to doubt Chloe's statement regarding the appearance of a ghost; but now, corroborated as it was by Jake, he could no longer question it. The cook had gone out specter hunting, which in itself was sufficient to prove that he did not give full credence to the old woman's words, and he had actually found that very disagreeable thing for which he sought. The boy fancied he could feel a cold chill in the marrow of his bones, and he was quite sure his hair was standing up like bristles in a clothes-brush.

"How big was it, Jake?" he asked as he clutched the cook's hand tightly lest the horrible thing might come to separate them.

"Well, it wasn't overly big, lad, an' that's a fact. The size don't count in sich creeters as that, an' a little feller is as bad as a reg'lar giant."

"But how large was it?"

"I wasn't so pertec'lar as to measure," Jake said slowly and in the most thrilling of whispers; "but as near as I could see before startin' kinder sudden for the tent, I'd reckon it was as big as a dog. It was white, with a long tail that stood up straight like the liberty pole on Marsh's Common."

"Don't you s'pose you could kill it?" Ben asked after another pause, during which he fancied he heard strange noises in the air.

"Kill a ghost?" Jake repeated as if the mere suggestion of such a thing filled him with horror. "Don't you know, lad, that cannon-balls could go right through them things without hurtin' 'em a bit?"

Ben had heard of this peculiarity on the part of unearthly visitors, but was never positive of the fact until at this minute, and the knowledge made him yet more frightened as well as despondent.

"What can we do, Jake?"

"We've got to get outter this place."

"I don't see how we shall be able to do that until some vessel comes."

"We must take to the raft, an' run our chances among the keys to the south'ard. If the old woman won't go with us peaceably, we'll either have to leave her, or lash her right down to one of the timbers where she can't help herself."

If anything had been needed to prove that Jake was thoroughly alarmed by what he had seen, the unfolding of this plan would have been sufficient. He had spoken very positively several times since the Simoon struck the reef of the folly of attempting to reach any inhabited place in a raft that could be neither guided or propelled, and yet now he was willing and eager to try the experiment, knowing all the dangers to be encountered.

“When shall we start?” Ben asked faintly.

“One full day’s work will be enough to strengthen our raft so that it will carry plenty of provisions an’ us four. Then we can leave day after to-morrow mornin’, an’ sha’n’t have to stay but one more night in this place where ghosts come right up outer the ground.”

Ben was quite as willing to brave the dangers of the raft, rather than run the risk of an encounter with the specter, as was the cook, and he made no objection to the proposed plan.

Neither felt inclined to lie down again while they were surrounded by so many terrors, and yet it would be hard to walk around all night, therefore they compromised by sitting in front of the tent, where they conversed in whispers until both fell into uneasy and uncomfortable slumber, which was rendered painful by visions of horrible monsters stalking about in search of shipwrecked people whom they roasted on red-hot gridirons.

It can easily be imagined that they did not make any attempt to court sleep next morning. As soon as the first gray light of the coming day appeared in the sky Jake began to prepare breakfast, and Ben busied himself with useless work around the camp lest he might be asked to go to the raft, for he had no desire to wander off by himself while the ghost made a dwelling-place of their key.

The noise and odor of the cooking soon aroused Gertie and old Chloe, who could not fail to notice that something was amiss with their companions, and when they begun to ask questions, Jake told the story of his too successful search, concluding it by announcing that he was going away on the raft next morning.

Gertie was alarmed, as a matter of course, and the old woman was plunged into a state of helpless terror. It was impossible for her to make any intelligible remark. She crouched on the ground with uplifted hands and rolling eyes, the very personification of fear, and with a grayish pallor replacing the usually shining black of her face. Not once did she attempt any protest against embarking on the raft, and since she was the only one from whom objections

to the plan might be expected, Jake and Ben looked upon the matter as settled.

As soon as breakfast had been eaten, the entire party went down to the shore, and the work of making a seaworthy craft out of the hastily constructed raft was begun, Chloe acting the part of a most interested spectator, as if eager to escape from the key regardless of the peril attendant upon the voyage.

It was necessary the workmen should have more material than had been lashed together when only a substitute for a ferry-boat was needed, and to this end Ben and Jake pulled out to the brig, bringing back with them the doors of the cabin and state-rooms, as well as such timbers as could readily be torn from their fastenings. They also secured a quantity of rope, a hammer and a few spikes, which made the labor decidedly lighter.

Jake was unwilling to spend the time necessary for the preparation for dinner because he thought it more important that they be ready to leave the key at the earliest possible moment, and old Chloe could not be persuaded to go back to the tent, so great was her fear that she might again be confronted by the specter. Ben was willing, though not eager, to do what he could in the matter of serving the meal, but he was needed at the beach to assist the chief raft-builder, therefore Gertie was obliged to play the part of cook.

"I can light a fire and heat the soup," she said as she started toward the tent, "and after that has been done I'll call you."

"Don't sing out till everything is ready," Jake cried by way of caution, "for we mustn't waste so much as a single minute."

"Be keerful ob youseself, honey," old Chloe said in a trembling voice, and Gertie went on, trying to appear brave, although she felt decidedly nervous.

During nearly an hour longer the raft-builders worked industriously, while the spectator watched every movement, and then the clear voice of Gertie could be heard summoning the ghost-ridden ones to dinner.

"Hurry up, aunty," Jake said as he dropped timbers and rope, and came out of the water in which he had been wading nearly to his knees. "We're goin' to make a short job of the eatin' business, for I don't have any notion of stayin' in this blessed place more'n one night longer."

Old Chloe never moved more quickly than at that moment, when she feared being left to go alone to the tent. Had Jake walked as rapidly again, she would probably have succeeded in keeping as close by his side as she did until they were within sight of Gertie, who was sitting near the fire fondling some white object.

One glimpse of that which the child held in her arms, and the old woman shrieked as she threw up her hands and sunk a helpless mass of quivering flesh on the sand:

“Dar’s de ghos’, an’ it’ll murder dat lubley chile!”

Jake glanced quickly toward the girl, and then suddenly stepped back as if meditating flight, but in an instant he recovered his composure as Ben shouted:

“Where did you find that cat, Gertie?”

“It came right up to me while I was getting dinner, and it must have been most starved to death if the way it ate cold soup is any sign. At first I thought it was Mammy Chloe’s ghost, and was just ready to run and scream when I heard it cry. Isn’t she pretty--pure white, with not a colored hair on her?”

Jake’s confusion was comical in the extreme. He walked slowly toward Gertie as he examined the animal narrowly, and then turned to look at the raft as he plunged his hands deep in his pockets and gave vent to a prolonged whistle. He did not stop to question how a cat came on that desolate island, for he was thoroughly abashed by the unmistakable fact that he had run away in fright from a half-starved, harmless animal, and positively declared that it was a specter. The gleam of the suffering creature’s eyes he had believed to be fire, and the tail standing “straight like the liberty-pole on Marsh’s common” had simply been magnified by his fears.

The cook had no idea of allowing himself to be held up to ridicule by Ben and Gertie if he could prevent it, therefore he said with more earnestness than truth:

“When I saw that thing I wasn’t so very certain what it was, but I thought we’d better get away from here as soon as we could so’s to keep the old woman quiet. Now she sees it’s only a cat, I hope she won’t be so foolish.”

Gertie ceased petting the animal long enough to look up at the cook with a twinkle of mirth in her eyes, but she refrained from making any remark, and Jake begun to point out to old Chloe the very foolish mistake she had made, as a means of hiding her own confusion.

It was not an easy matter to convince the negress that she had seen nothing more terrifying than a cat. After considerable urging she consented to look at the animal, and then, while admitting there was a slight resemblance between it and what had so alarmed her, insisted that it was a veritable ghost which she had met on the day previous.

Jake did not try very hard to induce the old woman to confess she had made a mistake, for he had been equally foolish, and did not care to have the fact brought out too prominently. When Chloe positively denied having transformed a cat into a ghost, he said in a matter-of-fact tone, and one which was remarkably free from fear, considering how thoroughly he had been alarmed but a few moments previous:

“Of course the cat looks a good deal like what we saw, but if she says it ain’t, that settles it, an’ the ghost is still roamin’ ’round the island. Howsomever, now that Gertie an’ Ben have got over bein’ scared, I don’t s’pose we’d better be in sich a hurry about leavin’.”

Against this decision old Chloe made no protest, and it was remarked privately by the younger members of the party that she seemed suddenly to have lost all fear, which was singular to say the least, if she was still firmly convinced she had seen and been chased by something unearthly.

After dinner, during which each of the castaways fed the cat as if she had rendered some valuable service, no mention was made of the proposed work on the raft. Jake composed his angular body in the best position for repose under the shade of a tree, and begun leisurely to smoke as if there was nothing urgent demanding his attention. Old Chloe bustled around the camp setting things generally to rights with apparently not a thought of making a hurried departure, and Gertie and Ben held an earnest and confidential conversation regarding the events which had caused so much terror and excitement.

It seemed as if the relief at finding that the ghost was only a large, half-starved cat was so great that Jake felt it necessary to spend the remainder of the afternoon in silent thanksgiving, for he did not even hint that it would be well to pay a visit to the brig before sunset, and deeply did he regret his indolence when another day dawned.

Just before twilight a supper of turtle-steaks, with plenty of boiled eggs, was served, and old Chloe evinced her gratitude because of the “laying of the ghost,” by making an enormous quantity of very strong tea, which she drank while a look of happiness made her face shine as if it had been a piece of ebony treated to an unusually vigorous application of furniture polish.

By the time the meal was finished the little party were glad to seek the shelter of their tent, for with the setting of the sun the wind sprang up from the north, and in an instant the warm air gave place to that which seemed icy cold.

The storm known as “a norther” was upon them, and it was even more disagreeable than Jake had declared it would be.

Every article which could be used as a covering was brought into requisition, and, although the shipwrecked ones were completely buried under the weight of blankets and canvas, they shivered and complained as if exposed to the fury of an Arctic gale.

The little party suffered quite as much from fear as from the cold, for as the wind increased in force the tent swayed back and forth until finally it was lifted entirely from its fastenings and thrown among the trees, leaving the castaways shelterless in the darkness of the night exposed to a pitiless storm.

The Castaways — Chapter XII

After The Norther

It was the piercing cold, the shrieking of the wind and the roaring of the waters rather than the storm itself that bewildered the castaways when the tent was blown away as if it had been only a bit of paper. No one appeared to be capable of even trying to devise some means by which they might be sheltered from the pitiless wind, but all crouched helplessly amid the heavy packages, which served in some slight degree to protect them from the icy blast.

Impossible as it was to distinguish any objects save those close at hand, unable to converse with each other because of the raging of the elements, which would have drowned even the booming of cannon, fearing lest the gale should increase in force until they themselves were blown from the low-lying island, and at times nearly suffocated by the whirling sand which enveloped them as with a cloud of smoke, the little party felt to the full their desolate condition.

It was a situation not equaled in agony of suspense by the night on the drifting wreck, for then it was possible to speak cheering words and to look into each other's face with the knowledge that if death claimed more victims all would perish together--not that one might be left to struggle and finally yield while alone.

Each moment of the hours that passed until the dawn came again was filled with misery for the wretched ones who crouched amid the ruins of their temporary home, and the seconds went so slowly that it could well be fancied the night would never end, but pass with all its horrors into eternity.

When the sun did finally come up from out his bath in the sea to still the winds, he looked upon a scene of destruction which had entirely changed the appearance of the little island. The trees, with but two exceptions, were broken or uprooted; the sand had been furrowed here in long ridges, or piled there in mounds, until where once had been a level surface was now a succession of tiny hills and valleys, and around all was a sparkling, leaping band of milky white as the waves churned themselves into foam against the coral shore.

Where had lain the wreck of the Simoon was a long line of crested waves, which towered upward as if in glee at having swept away the last vestige of the handiwork man had pitted against their strength. The raft upon which so much labor had been bestowed had also vanished, leaving no trace behind, save here and there a plank or timber thrown high up on the beach. Of the stores taken from the brig but little remained uninjured; some were partially buried in the sand, others ruined by the moisture, and not a few literally blown away. The water-breaker and about a dozen cans of beef were intact, but the soup and turtle eggs were no longer eatable. The storm had left the castaways hardly more than provisions enough to suffice for three days' consumption.

The cat was numbered among the sudden disappearances of the night. Gertie's first thought, when the sun dispelled the darkness, was of her pet, but she was nowhere to be found. She was in the tent when the wind carried the canvas away, but from that time no one had seen or heard of her; and, strange as it may seem, when they had lost all that was valuable to them, the castaways were more troubled about her than they were by the breaking up of their base of supplies.

"She nebber was no mortal cat," old Chloe said positively, and with just a suspicion of fear in her voice. "I knowed that when she fust came, an' now I'se sure she's a voodou what brought de storm wid her."

"More likely she got blown overboard," Jake replied impatiently. "There was one spell I thought we'd all go, an' that's when she went."

Gertie looked seriously troubled. The cat had come to her as if for protection, and at the same time cleared up what was a very painful mystery, therefore the child felt as if she had neglected that which should have been an especial duty by not thinking first of the animal when the storm burst.

"It's no use to stand here fussin' when we've got so many other things to trouble us," Jake said after he had searched unsuccessfully for the missing pet. "We must look out for ourselves pretty sharp now, or we'll soon be nearer starved than the cat was. Ben, you an' me will try and get our tent back, an' if aunty an' Gertie want to do anything, they can hunt for the provisions that have been buried in the sand."

Old Chloe did not make any move toward carrying out this suggestion. Her superstitious fears had returned with the supposed discovery that the cat was a voodou in disguise, and she was not willing to be left alone with only Gertie as a protector, therefore all four went in search of the missing tent.

This portion of their work was quickly done. The top-gallant sail was found about one hundred yards from the site of the camp, so firmly wound around the roots of an overturned tree that considerable labor was necessary before it could be removed. It was soon stretched again between the two remaining mangroves, this time lashed so securely that its supports would be torn away before it could be loosened, and hardly was it in place when old Chloe uttered a piercing shriek as she sunk in an undignified and decidedly ungraceful attitude on the sand, covering her black face with her yet blacker hands.

"What's come over that nigger now?" Jake cried angrily, and as he turned to learn the cause of the old woman's sudden collapse he saw the cat running at full speed toward Gertie.

The ex-cook of the Sea Queen had convinced himself by actual contact that the animal was not unearthly, and he could well afford to laugh as heartily as did Gertie and Ben at the negress' fright, which was as genuine as it was prolonged.

Unquestionably the cat had a hiding place where she knew she would be safe in a storm, and fled to it during the first wild burst of the tempest, but did not dare to return until the erection of the tent showed that her new-found friends were still there.

Gertie took the little creature in her arms, caressing it fondly to atone for past neglect, and by degrees old Chloe recovered her equanimity; but even when her fright had subsided she would neither touch nor look at the cat, which she still insisted was something more than an ordinary animal.

"I'se heerd ob dem tings, an' I'se knowed culled pussons what hab done bin killed by 'em," she replied when Gertie insisted that there was nothing to be feared from this dumb castaway. "Don' bring her nigh me, chile; don't do it, kase I'se los' de rabbit-foot what Mose gin me."

"You don't need any rabbit's-foot to perlect you agin a half-starved cat," Jake said with such a hearty burst of laughter that a stranger would never have suspected he had been frightened out of nearly every one of his seven senses by the same harmless animal.

After the excitement caused by the return of Gertie's pet subsided, and the old woman had so far become reconciled to the supposed "voodoo" as to be willing to remain in the same tent with it, Jake proposed that they all go to the beach in search of wreckage.

“Something useful may come ashore,” he said, “an’ we’re cut down to sich short allowance now that we’ve got to run across a few eatables, or stand a good chance of starvin’ to death.”

Any kind of work was better than remaining at the tent where everything reminded them of this third disaster, and they set out at once, old Chloe leading the way with wonderful agility that she might keep at a respectful distance from the alleged supernatural cat.

Although the storm had cleared away, the wind was blowing very strong from the west, and the sea towered up as high and menacing as in the early morning. The undertow was yet too powerful to admit of anything being washed ashore, and the little party searched over the entire northern side of the island without finding more than a broken plank or shattered cask.

“Some of the stuff will be sure to come up by mornin’, an’ if you and me, Ben, keep a sharp watch to-night I reckon it’ll more’n pay for the trouble. We needn’t expect even the smallest kind of a turtlin’ schooner till after the sea gets quieted down a little, an’ the best thing we can do now is to fix up our camp so’s it’ll look sorter homelike.”

As Jake spoke he turned toward the tent once more, and old Chloe begun to cast nervous glances at the cat which Gertie held tightly clasped in her arms, but made no protest at going where she would necessarily be near the innocent cause of her fear until when the girl would have remained close by her side.

“I’s done gwine ter walk ’lone, chile. You an’ Ben kin go off wid yerselves, kase I’s got no call for ter stay ’roun dat wuffless cat.”

“I do believe you’re afraid of her yet,” Ben cried merrily as he stroked the little animal who was purring a loud song of perfect content in her young mistress’ arms.

Chloe did not deign to reply, but loitered behind the others until they were so far in advance that she could make good her escape in case the “voodoo” should take upon itself some different and more terrifying form than that of a cat.

So far as her peace of mind was concerned, perhaps it was well she lingered, for when the other three entered the tent Gertie put her pet down for a moment in order to aid Jake and Ben in tightening some of the ropes which held the canvas in place, and on looking for the cat an instant later failed to find any traces of her.

All were decidedly alarmed now. It was positive the dumb castaway had not left the tent, for there was but one opening--directly in front--just outside of which they had been standing.

Jake peered cautiously under the canvas when he heard Gertie's low cry of surprise and alarm, and then he looked timidly around the key, as he said in a hoarse whisper to Ben, wiping the big drops of perspiration from his forehead:

"There's no use talkin', old Chloe come pretty nigh bein' right when she said the thing was a voodoo. There ain't any question 'bout it now, an' I thought all along that we was laughin' too quick, but I didn't wanter scare you children."

By this time Gertie had come out of the tent and stood looking at her companions, who remained motionless, as if fear had suddenly changed them into statues.

"There is some place around here where she hides, and we must find it or Aunt Chloe will have another spell," she said, speaking to Ben rather than Jake. "You are not so foolish as to think there can be anything unnatural about her?"

"No," Ben said with an effort; "we'll hunt over every inch of the key, an' perhaps we can find the hole, for she must have one somewhere."

"If you take my advice you'll both stay right here with me," Jake said solemnly. "Tim Jinks, my old shipmate, knowed of a cat that could change----"

Gertie had no idea of waiting to hear the conclusion of what was probably some blood-curdling tale; the name of Tim Jinks was sufficient guarantee that a particularly horrible ghost story was to be related, and before Jake could get further on in it than this brief introduction, she led Ben inside the tent.

The cook looked furtively around when he was left alone, as if questioning whether companionship would not be preferable, even if he was forced to face the unknown danger, to remaining alone; but a single thought of the cat Tim Jinks had known was enough to send him away very rapidly from that undesirable locality.

Old Chloe had seated herself on a little hillock of sand, midway between the beach and the trees, where she could have timely warning in case any horrible thing approached, and Jake bent his steps in that direction.

He was on the point of explaining why the children remained behind, taking no heed of the spasm into which the old woman would most assuredly be thrown, when a loud cry from Ben caused him to turn once more in alarm.

“Come here, Jake, an’ be quick about it! The cat has been hidin’ in a hole at the foot of one of the trees, an’ there’s a box in it that looks like a little trunk! If you’ll help me we’ll soon dig it out.”

A Singular Coincidence

The mere mention of anything being concealed on that desolate key suggested hidden treasure to Jake, and in an instant he had forgotten his fears of the cat, concerning whose sudden disappearances there could now be nothing mysterious, if Ben and Gertie had really found her place of refuge.

“Come on, aunty!” he cried excitedly. “The youngsters have discovered what I reckon must be pirates’ gold, for they do say these keys used to be thick with ’em.”

Chloe had not been able to understand what Ben said, and of Jake’s invitation it seemed as if she heard nothing save the one word, “pirate.” The sight of the supposed voodoo had frightened her out of nearly all her senses, and this last announcement completed the work.

“For de Lawd’s sake, don’ go ’way now, Massa Jake!” she cried imploringly, making several ineffectual efforts to rise to her feet. “Ef de pirates done gone come we’s dead, suah, an’ what’ll a po’ ole nigger woman do when she’s lef’ alone?”

It had never flashed across the cook’s mind that even the most timid could take alarm at his very natural proposition, and he was off before Chloe began to speak, rushing into the tent in the highest state of excitement.

“What have you found, lad?” he cried. “Show it to me! Tim Jinks knowed men who allers said there was plenty of gold buried on these keys, an’ perhaps our gettin’ lost in the fog is goin’ to turn out a mighty lucky thing for us.”

It was only necessary for Ben to point toward a small hole, which evidently extended some distance beneath one of the mangrove trees, and in an instant Jake was on his knees.

“I don’t see any box,” he said impatiently, as he peered into the aperture.

“Reach your hand in and you can feel it. The place must be pretty big, ’cause we couldn’t see anything of the cat while she was there, an’ we only knew where she had hidden herself by Gertie’s calling two or three times.”

Jake began his investigations in the manner suggested by Ben, and a few seconds later his excitement had increased to such an extent that it was only after considerable difficulty he could calm himself sufficiently to speak intelligibly.

“Run after some of them barrel-staves we saw on the beach,” he cried. “The thing, whatever it is, has been there so long that we’ll have to do a good deal of diggin’ before we can get it out.”

While Ben was obeying this command the cat left the tent, and old Chloe’s screams were so loud and piercing that there could be no doubt as to the direction in which the animal had gone.

“That nigger would provoke the mildest-mannered man who ever lived,” Jake said angrily, forgetting how short a time had elapsed since he also was quite as much afraid of the half-starved cat. “I’d like to lash somethin’ over her mouth so’s we could hear ourselves think.”

“Perhaps Kitty’s tail is sticking straight up like the liberty-pole on Marsh’s common, and you know such a sight would scare almost any one,” Gertie said mischievously, as she left the tent to quiet the old woman’s fears, while Jake’s face grew very red as he muttered, half to himself:

“Nobody would a’ thought of findin’ a cat in this place, an’ even Tim Jinks hisself might a’ been flustered for a minute.”

Although there was no one near to hear this apology, the cook appeared to feel relieved because it had been made, and once more turned his attention to the supposed treasure. He dug away the sand with his hands in his eagerness to unearth it, and when Ben arrived with an armful of broken staves from a cask which had been washed ashore, the aperture was enlarged until it was possible to have a reasonably good view of what the children believed to be a small trunk.



“It’s a box strapped with canvas,” he said as Ben entered the tent, “an’ looks to me as if it had belonged to a sailor-man, consequently we must a’ struck the pirates’ gold.”

“We sha’n’t be long findin’ out all about it,” Ben replied as he began to use one of the staves after the manner of a shovel, and Jake following his example immediately, the sand was soon flying in a cloud.

It was far from being as easy, however, to remove the box as had been supposed. The smaller roots of the tree covered one end almost completely, and not until these were cut away could it be pulled to the surface.

Gertie, with the alleged supernatural cat following close behind, came into the tent as this portion of the work was accomplished, and what she saw was not calculated to convey the impression that any very valuable discovery had been made.

A dilapidated-looking box, about two feet long, half as high and twice as wide, with one end badly decayed, and the canvas straps which held it together black and rotten, was on the sand, while Jake bent over it as if almost afraid to solve the mystery now that it could be done so easily.

Chloe gazed at this evidence that the key had been visited by man at least once before, with such absorbing interest that she failed even to see the cat, who was rubbing against her dress in a friendly fashion, and the others

appeared as if fascinated by the not particularly pleasant-looking sight, until Ben cried impatiently:

"Why don't you open it, Jake? What's the use of standin' here starin' at a thing when it won't take two minutes to find out what's inside?"

The cook started suddenly, as if for the moment he had forgotten where he was, and then with his pocket-knife proceeded to cut such of the bands as yet remained whole, the cover falling off as the last one was severed.

An exclamation of disappointment burst from Jake's lips as the contents of the box were revealed. He had fully expected to find it filled with gold or valuables of some kind, despite the fact that it was far from being heavy, and when nothing but mouldy clothing met his eager gaze it appeared as if he believed he had just cause for complaint because his anticipations were not realized.

"I call that a mighty mean piece of business," he said indignantly. "Nobody had any right to bury old duds as if they was gold."

"Perhaps there is something in it besides clothes," Ben suggested.

"Then hunt for it if you want to, I'm through," and Jake seated himself on the sand in a very grief stricken attitude.

"But how could clothes be buried under the trees if no one lives here?" Gertie asked curiously as Ben begun to pull the musty garments from the box.

"I reckon some sailor got wrecked on this key," Jake replied in an angry tone, "an' he was sich a howlin' swell that he thought more of his duds than he did of hisself. He mighter knowed they'd a sp'iled in two or three months. Tim Jinks once----"

"There is something else here!" Ben exclaimed as he held up a small but heavy canvas bag and shook it. "That sounds like money, anyway."

Jake was on his feet in an instant, and breaking the string which was around the mouth of the bag, poured its contents on the sand in front of Gertie, the gloomy look on his face changing to one of satisfaction as a large number of gold coins were exposed to view.

"I reckon there's nigh onto a thousand dollars in the pile, which ain't so bad considerin' that it looked one spell as if what we'd found wasn't worth the trouble of luggin' it away."

"There's something besides money here," Gertie said as she took a paper from the bag which Jake had thrown aside, believing it to be empty. "It's a letter, and directed to 'Whoever finds my dun--dun--' I can't exactly make out some of the writing, but it looks like 'dunnage.'"

"I reckon that's what it is. A sailor allers calls his traps dunnage; but go ahead an' read what he says. I'd like to know why he left his money here when most folks would a'took it away--that is," Jake added solemnly, "if they could get off theirselves."

"It's dated eight years ago," Gertie said as she deciphered the faded writing only after the greatest difficulty, while the others stood close beside her that not a word should be lost. "It'll take a good while to read it because some of the words are almost rubbed out."

"Go ahead the best you can," Ben said impatiently, "an' skip the part that's hard."

Slowly, hesitating now and then over some portion, the meaning of which was obscure, or spelling here and there an entire sentence, Gertie read what was in reality a message from the dead, while Ben's face exhibited alternately the varying emotions of astonishment, grief and something very nearly approaching fear.

"I am writing this with but little hope that it will ever be read," the letter, manuscript or whatever it should be called, began, "and yet I pray that God may send--not as I came, but from motives of curiosity or pleasure--some one to this desolate key who will convey these, my last words, to my wife and little ones. My name is Isaac Clark, and I did live in Savannah."

At this point Jake looked toward Ben, whose face had grown very pale, and who said in a low tone, much as if the cook had asked a question:

"That was my father's name, and he was lost at sea a good many years ago."

"Go on, Gertie," Jake said with a gesture of impatience, and then he added half to himself: "It would be the most curious thing I ever heard about if the boy had been cast away on the very key where his father died."

"I am, or was, first mate of the brig Flying Scud," Gertie continued, reading in a low, solemn tone, "which left Savannah on the fourth of last month, just forty days ago, bound for Key West. Off Cape Florida we run into a nor'easter. In eighteen hours the brig was dismasted, and while trying to clear away the wreckage every soul except me was swept overboard. My left arm had been broken two hours before, when both boats were stove, and I was in the cabin at the time of the last disaster, which accounts for my being the only survivor, spared from the sea to die miserably on this coral reef alone. For two days the wreck was tossed about just outside the chain of keys, and then she came ashore here, thrown broadside on the southerly end, hanging there only

twenty-four hours before being carried away again by a norther which destroyed every vestige of her except the few things I had managed to drag into this clump of mangroves. I have rigged up a decent kind of a tent from some spare canvas, and would have every reason to believe I could reach the main land by means of a raft but for my broken arm. I tried to set the bones, but a man with one arm cannot make much of a fist at playing the surgeon on himself, and the end is now very near. Mortification has already begun, and I am doomed to lie here seeing my body die slowly while my mind is sufficiently active to note every change."

Gertie's eyes were so full of tears that she was forced to stop a moment, and it appeared as if the brief interruption in this record of suffering was a welcome one to the listeners. Jake opened the flap of the tent to hide his face by looking out over the angry waters, while Ben crouched on the sand sobbing, for it seemed as if he was by the side of his dying father, as he had been with his mother and brother in their last moments.

"Is there any more of it?" Jake asked after a long silence, during which the thunder of the surf as it beat against the coral shore filled the air with a sound as of impotent grief.

"Only a few lines," Gertie replied, and then brushing the moisture from her eyes again, she continued:

"I shall inclose this letter in the money-bag which contains all my earnings, taken from home with the intention of investing them in Key West, and place the box in a hole which I have scraped out under the roots of this tree. Probably it will never be found, since if this lonely place is ever visited, it is hardly likely there will be a thought of searching beneath the surface, but it is the only chance, for during the next high wind every movable article, including my poor body, must necessarily be swept from the key. If it should be discovered, however, I charge the finder, if he would aid the widow and fatherless, to send the money to Mrs. Isaac Clark, care of Gibson and Deane, Savannah, Georgia, and may God in His infinite goodness reward him.

"To my beloved wife and darling children I send the blessing of a dying husband and father, praying now, as I shall with my last breath, that they may be kept from sorrow and all bodily suffering, after the first pangs occasioned by my death shall have passed away."

The letter, discolored by age and dampness, as with the tears of the unfortunate man who wrote it, was finished, while the three castaways sat around the box from which it had been taken looking mutely at each other,

and the silence was not broken until a voice of distress could be heard in the distance, calling feebly:

“Gertie! Honey! Whar is you? Hab de pirates done gone lugged you off for suah? Don’ yer hear po’ ole Auntie Chloe?”

Ben paid no attention to this cry, which under other circumstances his ears would have been open to so quickly, and Jake motioned for Gertie to leave the tent, saying when they were a short distance away:

“It’s kinder like as if he was to his father’s funeral, an’ the best thing we can do is leave the poor little feller alone while we try to make Chloe stop her yellin’.”

The last portion of the self-imposed task was not so easy of accomplishment. Even when the old woman saw the two before her, she was still almost frantic with fear, and not until after at least fifteen minutes had been spent trying to explain the situation of affairs could she be reduced to a condition of partial quietude.

She finally came to understand what had been found, and then more than ever was she convinced that supernatural influences were at work on the island; but her terror was less noisy, and this, to Jake at least, was a decided change for the better.

“Let’s you and I hunt for the tea and the pot,” Gertie said as she took the withered black hand in hers. “We shall all feel ever so much better after a hot breakfast, for it must be nearly noon.”

The old woman suffered herself to be led toward the place where the tent had been pitched on the previous day. Jake crept softly under the canvas, where Ben still sat beside his father’s box in silent grief, got two of the staves, and then went back to dig among the furrows of sand in the hope of finding provisions.

By the greatest good fortune, so far as Aunt Chloe was concerned, the tea canister was unearthed after half an hour’s work, and not far from it was the battered tin pot.

“Now we can begin housekeepin’ once more,” Jake said, trying to speak cheerfully, but in vain; the message from the dead had oppressed every one visibly, for it told what might be their own fate. “Auntie, you build a fire, while I hunt for more stuff, and after breakfast is ready we’ll call Ben, but not till then. Don’t get to feelin’ down-hearted, for if his father did die here it was cause he couldn’t help hisself, owin’ to a broken arm; but we’ll rig up some way to leave this place.”

Occupation for the hands was needed quite as much as anything else, and even old Chloe appeared to understand this, for she bustled around quite briskly, regardless alike of the wind which was yet strong and cold, and the cat who persisted in following Gertie wherever she went.

The Castaways — Chapter XIV

An Old Friend

Although there was but little variety at the first meal after the norther, the castaways had every reason to be thankful that so much was left. Hot tea, canned beef and ships' bread made a meal such as hungry people could not grumble about, and when it was ready Gertie went to the tent for Ben according to Jake's suggestion.

"You go after him," the cook said, "'cause I reckon you can do it better'n me or old Chloe. Of course he feels bad; but he don't remember his father, an' it ain't to be expected that he'll grieve so very long. We'll make him stir around huntin' for wreckage, an' that'll do him a power of good."

What Gertie said to Ben in the way of sympathy the others never knew. The two remained inside the tent some time, and when they came out the contents of the box had been restored to their former condition and put into the excavation again for safe keeping.

Every member of the party was in need of food, and when the meal came to an end all felt wonderfully refreshed. Their own condition, which had seemed so desperate while they listened to the letter of the unfortunate man who died alone on the key, now appeared to be more hopeful, and instead of viewing the situation in the most dismal light, Jake spoke very cheerfully.

"We sha'n't starve to death, even if we have to stay here six months, because of the shell-fish," he said by way of preface to the plan of action he was about to propose. "In that time we oughter rig up some kind of a craft that'll carry us to the mainland, or another key where there's more chance of bein' picked up by a vessel. To sit here thinkin' of what may happen will only make things worse, an' all hands must go to work."

"What can we do?" Gertie asked.

"You an' old Chloe must hunt for things that the norther buried in the sand, an' I tell you what it is, aunty, nothin' but hard labor now will ever give you a chance of seein' Moses agin."

"Why don' dat wuffless nigger come here an' git his po' ole mammy when she's in sich a terruble place?"

"There's a good many reasons why he don't, aunty," Jake replied with a laugh. "Fust an' foremost, he don't know where she is, an' then agin he'd stand

a pretty poor show of gettin' here, 'lowin' that he wanted to come, so you've got to help yourself. Me an' Ben will have our hands full watchin' the beach for wreckage, an' we've got to look after that part of the work mighty sharp, 'cause we're dependin' on what washes ashore for our raft. Come, lad, we'll make a clean circuit of the key once more, an' by that time I reckon we'll want a little rest."

As he spoke the cook arose to his feet, Ben following the example, and when the two started toward the beach, Gertie began to carry out the former's instructions.

She and Aunt Chloe dug into every hillock of sand industriously, and before the afternoon was more than half gone they had quite a collection of household goods. Nearly all the bed-clothing was recovered; the cases of lime-juice, with which the brackish water in the breaker could be rendered palatable, were unearthed, and two boxes of ship's bread found.

These goods were carried into the tent, and the weary workers had but just sat down behind the canvas, where they would be sheltered from the wind at the same time that the warmth of the sun's rays would reach them, when the other members of the party returned.

"You've had good luck," Jake said as he looked into the tent, "an' we haven't been so far behind. Ben an' me have found half a dozen planks an' one of the hatches, all of which we've dragged up where there won't be any danger they'll be washed away. By to-morrow night I'm allowin' we'll have enough to build a pretty comfortable kind of a raft. The tools an' nails that were brought ashore must still be here, an' after we've had a little breathin' spell we'll take our turn at bucklin' onto the staves."

Gertie mixed some lime-juice and water, knowing the travelers must be thirsty after their long walk, and when he had drank what appeared to be two men's allowance, the cook filled his pipe, turning in true sailor fashion to windward as he lighted the match.

That particular flame was never applied to the tobacco, however, for an instant later he had dashed the pipe to the ground as he shrieked:

"See there! See! See! Now what do you think the chances are of our leavin' this blessed key?"

The cook was acting more like an insane person than a castaway who had just been advocating hard work as a means of preventing the mind from dwelling on unwelcome thoughts. He danced wildly around, pointing and staring out over the black, angry-looking waters as if he beheld some beautiful

scene, and it was several moments before his companions could understand what had caused such a change of manner.

Then Ben succeeded in discovering the same object which had apparently transformed a weary, reasonably sensible man into a lunatic, and he shouted as he seized old Chloe by the arms, she having risen to her feet meantime, forcing her to spin around and around with him like a top.

"It's a vessel! It's a vessel coming right this way, and she can't fail to see us!"

After this explanation both Gertie and Chloe were able to distinguish far away in the distance the white wings, than which nothing could be more welcome, and the old negress clasped her hands in an ecstasy of joy as she shouted:

"He's come! My Moses hab come for his mammy, bress de Lawd! an' we'se all gwine home to Savannah once mo'. I'se had 'nuff ob tryin' to git up Norf, an' now, praise de Lam'! I'se gwine ter stay in Georgy."

By this time Jake had grown more quiet, and as he continued to gaze over the water a troubled look came upon his face.

"She's comin' this way, for a fact," he said slowly, "but it's because she can't do much of anything else than run dead before the wind. Don't you see the foremast has gone by the board, an' that the other spars look shaky? She isn't in very much better trim than the old Simoon was when we found her."

"What do you suppose has happened?" Ben asked, forgetting for the moment the events of the previous night.

"I reckon she's been foolin' round with the same norther that made things lively for us, though why she's pokin' her nose into this shoal water when she could a' bore up toward the coast, is more'n I can figger out."

"Will she stop here and take us away?" Gertie asked as she looked over the waters, unable at times to distinguish anything save the foaming crests of the waves.

"I calculate she's bent on gettin' to leeward of this island, where most likely there's fair anchorage; but yet she may go past without so much as sayin' howdy, an' we'd better try to let her skipper know that there are some passengers here who're mighty anxious about makin' his acquaintance. Come, Ben we must set fire to one or two of the trees that the storm knocked over, an' I reckon the smoke they make will be as good as a telegraph message."

In this particular case it proved fortunate that the ex-cook of the Sea Queen was an inveterate smoker, otherwise their stock of matches might have

shared the fate of the provisions. As it was Jake had a plentiful supply of those very useful articles, and with them a blaze was soon kindled under three of the up-rooted trees.

By the time the smoke begun to rise it was possible to distinguish quite clearly the approaching craft as she plunged into the hollows of the waves sullenly, or ascended the watery slopes wearily, her splintered spars and flying ropes giving her the appearance of some beautiful animal wounded unto death.

The strong wind carried the smoke far away to the eastward without allowing it to rise very high; but it made such a signal as must have been seen by those on the coming vessel, yet no answer was given.

“Why don’t they let her go off two or three points?” Jake asked anxiously as he watched the movements of the schooner, which was still headed directly for the island and approaching dangerously near. “That captain must be drunk or crazy to run such risks.”

The stranger was now such a short distance away that those on the key could make out the form of a man at the helm, and one amidships, consequently there could be no question but that the craft was yet under control.

On, on came the laboring vessel, dashing the waves into foam which was flung mast-head high, or plunging down into the abyss of waters until it seemed as if she was going to the bottom, while the excited watchers literally held their breaths as the course remained unchanged, and Jake shouted and waved his hands as if he fancied the men were not able to see the island on which the schooner must soon be flung unless immediate steps were taken to prevent such a catastrophe.

“It looks as if they wanted to wreck her,” Ben cried, clutching Gertie by the arm much as if he believed her to be in danger. “There is nothing to prevent them from going clear of the island, for if she doesn’t answer the helm that man wouldn’t be standing at the wheel.”

“I can’t make it out, lad,” Jake replied in a tone of perplexity. “If they wanted to wreck the schooner it seems as if there were a good many better places; but if that ain’t the scheme, I’m beat.”

Even as he spoke the doomed vessel plunged into the shore line of the waves, rolling to and fro one instant as she half rose above them, and then settled down upon the coral with a crash that sent the only remaining spar tumbling over the rail like a rotten stick.

The castaways on the island stood speechless with astonishment, and motionless as statues, during what looked like the willful destruction of the schooner, and expecting each instant to see the men swept from the deck by the angry sea.

In this, however, they were happily mistaken. The waves were not running nearly as high as appeared to be the case when viewed from the low plane of the island, and, save for an occasional sea which broke over the stern, the vessel's deck was free from water as if she had been running easily before the wind.

When the first crash was heard Aunt Chloe stood speechless with fear and bewilderment; but before either of the eager watchers could utter a word, she cried, shaking Jake vigorously by the arm to secure his undivided attention:

"Can you see my Mose on dat ar' vessel what's done gone smashed herself up when we wanted to be took away?"

"Don't you worry 'bout him, aunty. He's up North I reckon, an' he can thank his lucky stars for bein' there instead of on that craft which can't stand the poundin' of them waves very long, 'cordin' to my way of thinkin'."

Those on board did not seem at all solicitous regarding their condition. The schooner had struck squarely on that side of the key which ran out to a shoal, and was lying upright and steady, a fact which soon caused Jake to change his opinion regarding what at first appeared like willful destruction.

"I thought they were crazy, but now I reckon they've done a wise thing. She was pretty nigh wrecked, an' most likely takin' in water so fast that it was hard work to keep her afloat, so she's been plumped on here where the cargo can be saved."

"And we're no better off than if she hadn't come," Ben said sadly, for the storm had left them so nearly destitute that he knew aid in some form must come quickly or their situation would be desperate.

"That's where you're mistaken, my boy. There's no question but that they've plenty of provisions on board, an' what's better, is the timber which can be got out of her. It'll make a raft large enough to hold a hundred, an' her crew will most likely go at that work when the sea is quiet enough for them to land."

"But how can the men get ashore?" Gertie asked anxiously. "It looks as if the vessel was a long distance from the beach."

“By to-morrow mornin’ I reckon you’ll see ’em swim for it, or send a line ashore to be made fast to one of the trees. We’ll keep the fire goin’ all night, an’ if anything should happen we shall be on hand if we’re wanted.”

The men on the stranded schooner could now be seen working as quietly and methodically as if she had been at a dock instead of virtually wrecked. The fallen spar was thumping heavily against the side, and this they were cutting partially away, trying to force it inshore rather than set it adrift entirely.

The little party on the key had almost unconsciously moved toward the beach until they were at the very edge of the water, and as they stood gazing earnestly at the wreck, which lay only a few hundred yards away, one of the men leaped on the rail as he began to wave his arms vigorously.

“He wants us to do something. Can you hear what he says?” Ben asked, but Jake made no reply. He was staring as wildly at the figure as ever he had at the “voodoo” cat, and seemingly quite as much alarmed as when that harmless animal first made her appearance, while the sailor on the rail gesticulated as if carrying on an animated conversation with the wind.

“What is the matter?” Ben cried, growing somewhat alarmed because of the cook’s singular behavior.

“Matter?” screamed Jake as, his scrutiny ended, he begun to dance about on the beach, waving his hat frantically. “Can’t you see who that is? Don’t any of you know an old friend when he’s in sight?”

“Is it my Mose?” Aunt Chloe asked in a trembling voice, and Gertie said pleadingly:

“Tell us who it is. How could we know any one belonging to that vessel?”

“It’s Captain Jack Irwin, an’ he’s signalin’ to us because he knows who we are.”

“Captain Irwin!” Ben repeated in amazement. “Why that isn’t the Sea Queen.”

“I know it; but it’s him all the same, though how he comes to be on that craft beats me.”

The others were quite as much surprised as the cook, but it was impossible to solve the mystery by speculation, try as they might, and after each one had made several very improbable guesses, Ben asked:

“Why don’t we do something toward helpin’ him ashore? Perhaps that was what he tried to talk about when he shouted so long.”

“What can we do, lad? We’re worse off than he is, for there’s plenty of stuff on the schooner with which to build a raft, while we’ve got nothin’.”

"Then why doesn't he come ashore?" Gertie asked, while old Chloe sat on the sand as if the exertion of thinking had entirely exhausted her.

"Wait till the sea quiets down a bit, an' then he'll be here. The wind is fallin' now, the schooner lays easy, or will in a little while, an' there's no reason for him to hurry much. Most likely he'll stay where he is till mornin', but we'll keep the fire goin' in case he should try it to-night. You an' Chloe make some more tea, while Ben an' I drag the trees together, an' it won't be long now before we'll know the whole story."

The sight of the wreck had apparently caused the old negress to forget her fears of the cat, and she displayed an unusual amount of activity in preparing such a supper as the condition of the larder would permit.

By the time Jake and Ben had carried or dragged all the up-rooted trees near the fire, that the work of keeping the blaze alive might be lessened as much as possible, the shadows of night were gathering fast and dense, and while the castaways partook of the evening meal they looked at nothing save the dark mass in the gloom, which all knew marked the position of the wreck.

The Fate Of The Sea Queen

The wind “went down with the sun,” speaking after the manner of the weather-wise, and once more the air was warm and balmy. Even had it continued cold the castaways would have had no thought of retiring to the tent that night. The stranded schooner, the mystery attending Captain Irwin’s appearance, and the hope of speedily being able to leave the key, all served to plunge them in such a state of excitement that there was no desire for sleep.

Jake and Ben kept the fire burning merrily, for there was no necessity now to husband the fuel, and Gertie held the cat in her arms as all speculated upon the singular chain of circumstances which had brought Captain Irwin to that lonely key at the very time when he was most needed.

In this way, alternately conversing and listening for any hail which might come from the wreck, the night passed, and when morning dawned there was nothing to prevent those on the schooner from landing. The sea was like a mirror for smoothness, with not a ripple on its glassy surface, and the long swell rolled up on the beach with the faintest of murmurs as if weary with the turmoil of the previous twenty-four hours.

That Captain Irwin and his companion had felt perfectly secure regarding the condition of affairs was shown by their being yet asleep as Jake and Ben went down to the very edge of the shore when the first light of day gave them a view of the deck. The hulk was keeled over slightly, the receding waves having left her considerably nearer the land, but otherwise she rested as securely as if on a submarine railway, and her position would probably remain unchanged until another storm transformed the lazy undulations into leaping, angry waves.

“They seem to be takin’ things pretty cool for shipwrecked men,” Jake said after he and his companion had gazed at the hulk several moments in silence. “It appears as if we were the ones who borrowed the most trouble. I reckon it’s time for Captain Jack to tell us how he came aboard of that craft, an’ here goes for wakin’ him. Schooner ahoy! Aho-o-o-y!”

“Halloo on shore!” Captain Irwin replied as he leaped to his feet, the calm of the morning permitting the words to ring out distinctly.

"Have you made up your mind to stay there all day, or will you come ashore an' have breakfast?"

"I reckon we'll land as soon as we can get a rope stretched. Wade into the water as far as you can, and I'll pass a heaving line."

"It ain't the pleasantest thing in the world to go foolin' 'round where there are sharks," Jake muttered, his old habit of grumbling coming upon him now that the captain's presence seemed to assure the safety of all; "but perhaps they won't ven'ter over the shoals."

"I'll go," Ben said eagerly. "It would have to be a pretty lively shark that could catch me."

"Stay where you are and take care of old Chloe an' Gertie," the cook replied with a comical assumption of dignity as he waded into the low-running surf.

Five minutes later he was walking toward the shore pulling a light hawser which was made fast to the heaving-line, and with Ben's assistance a couple of half-hitches were soon taken around the trunk of the largest mangrove tree.

When this had been done the main hatch was launched as a boat, and on it Captain Irwin and his companion landed without difficulty.

For several moments after he stepped ashore the scene was one of boisterous confusion. It appeared as if Jake and Ben would never grow weary of shaking hands, and Gertie got half a dozen kisses before she believed her share of the welcome had been received.

"Tell us how you got aboard of that craft, and where the Sea Queen is," Jake said as soon as he could make himself heard, and Captain Irwin replied with a smile:

"You'd better spin your yarn first, for it puzzles me considerably to know where you picked up two new shipmates," and he pointed toward Aunt Chloe and the cat.

It was some time before either of the little party had become sufficiently calm to be able to tell a connected story, but they finally succeeded after many interruptions from each other, and when all the adventures had been related, including the finding of the message from the dead, they learned of the Sea Queen's fate, Captain Irwin's story being substantially as follows:

The fog enshrouded the schooner just as the line was made fast to the turtle, and fully ten minutes before Jake, Gertie and Ben were aware of its coming. Captain Irwin had just gone below before the cloud came up out of the sea, and the mate who was in charge neglected to take the bearings of the boat before the dense vapor hid her entirely from view. There was no wind,

and to send out a crew in search of the lost ones, not knowing in which direction they were towed by the turtle, would have been the height of folly, therefore no move was made until the wind sprung up, an hour or two before midnight.

During this enforced idleness, when his step-daughter was in such great peril, Dr. Harlan showed but little genuine anxiety. He seemed to be annoyed, fearing he might be deprived of Gertie's services after learning of how much assistance she could be in his peculiar business, and scolded considerably because Captain Irwin had said there was no danger to be apprehended in attempting to capture the turtle, but evinced no sorrow for her possible fate. When the longed-for wind came and the schooner was gotten under way, the quack went into his state-room, even though both watches remained on deck to act as lookouts, and so far as could be ascertained, slept soundly. The vessel's course was set toward that point where the boat had last been seen, and all hands kept up an incessant shouting until the howling of the gale drowned their friendly cries.

When the storm which had thrown the Simoon on the key was at its height, it would have been impossible to extend any aid even had the little craft been close alongside, and the Sea Queen was headed toward the open waters of the gulf, it being the captain's intention to run into the very teeth of the wind until it subsided, when he would continue the search for the missing ones.

As a matter of course, the night was as black as the castaways had experienced while on the dismantled brig. The lookout could not see a dozen yards ahead, and the Sea Queen plunged blindly through the waves, making but little headway, until nearly three o'clock in the morning, when suddenly a vessel hove up through the gloom close on the starboard bow, running dead before the gale.

Hardly a dozen seconds elapsed from the time the craft first came into view until she struck the Sea Queen amidships, and owing to her greater velocity, crashed through the timbers as if they had been paper.

The stranger's foremast was carried away by the shock, and with it four of her crew of five, while she was badly stove about the bow. The Sea Queen received the brunt of the collision. She was rolled over by the blow which had splintered her timbers below the water-line, and sank before the frightened crew had time to make the least effort toward providing for their own safety. Captain Irwin was near the starboard rail aft when the catastrophe occurred, and was hurled into the water clear of his own vessel toward the other craft,

which accident resulted in the saving of his life while all the others on the schooner perished. He had instinctively struck out with his arms on coming to the surface near the stranger's cutwater, and a huge wave dashed him directly upon the main-chains, from where he readily clambered inboard.

The Mermaid, which was the name of the craft that had sunk the Sea Queen, had but one of her crew surviving, and it was some moments before anything could be done to prevent her also from foundering. When Captain Irwin had collected his scattered senses and learned of the damage done to the colliding vessel, the foremast was thrashing and pounding against the side in a manner that threatened speedily to shatter every timber, and the efforts of both men were directed to the task of cutting it adrift. Several times, before this was accomplished, did it seem as if the remaining spars would go by the board, but fortunately the Mermaid was nearly new, her standing rigging in good condition, and it was possible, after the most severe exertions, to heave her to.

In this position she rode out the gale even better than could have been expected, but Captain Irwin and the man, Tom Johnson, were obliged to work more than half the time at the pumps. Daylight found them in nearly the same place, but nothing could be seen of the ill-fated Sea Queen save a mass of wreckage far away to the westward.

Although the Mermaid was in imminent danger of foundering, Captain Irwin bore away in the hope of finding some of his crew, but all in vain. During the day, while the two men alternately stood at the wheel and worked the pump, she cruised in the vicinity, and at night-fall, positive that none save themselves had survived the disaster, knowing also that the schooner could not long be kept afloat, the course was set for Key West.

Before that port could be reached, and when both men were nearly exhausted, the norther sprang up. That the Mermaid would live through it neither of those who were working so manfully believed; but she did, despite her crippled condition, and when the gale abated sufficiently to admit of making any headway, she was steered for the nearest land.

"We didn't get here any too soon," Captain Irwin said as he concluded the story. "Johnson and I were so nearly used up that it would have been almost impossible to work the pumps three hours longer, and when we struck this key the Mermaid was two-thirds full of water. There was no thought of coming ashore last night, for we needed sleep more than anything else, and in ten

minutes after she took ground our eyes were closed, not to be opened until you hailed.”



“Well, now that you’re here, captain, what are you goin’ to do toward helpin’ us get away from this place?” Jake asked. “It looks pretty nice while a feller’s on a sinkin’ vessel; but when he’s tied right down to it, knowin’ what happened to Ben’s father, it ain’t the pleasantest island to live on I ever saw.”

“I don’t fancy we need stay very long,” Captain Irwin replied cheerfully. “We shall be pretty poor sailors if we can’t rig up a craft out of the schooner’s timbers, and it isn’t very far to Key West.”

“Where are we?” Jake asked quickly.

“On Content Key.”

“Then I was right,” he cried triumphantly, and from that moment he believed himself to be very nearly as good a navigator as he knew he was a cook.

“Now let’s see what Jake and aunty can do in the way of getting breakfast,” Captain Irwin said. “There are plenty of provisions on the Mermaid, and the galley-stove can be brought ashore, or they be taken on board as may be preferred. My idea is that two cooks ought to be able to feed us pretty well while we stay here.”

"I'se worked for some ob de fustest families in Georgy," old Chloe said with considerable dignity, "an' I knows how mos' ebery kind ob a dish oughter be served; but I'se done gone got frou paddlin' roun' on little boards."

"Then Johnson and Jake shall go after the stove, and from this time out, aunty, your reputation as a cook is at stake, for we shall all be able to eat our full allowance. Come, Ben, you and I will set about finding the best place for a ship-yard, and after that has been done, all hands, excepting of course old Chloe and Gertie, will begin dismantling the schooner. I am expecting that we shall make decently good wages in the matter of salvage, for she is loaded with hides, and every one of them can be saved."

The captain's business-like manner had a wonderful effect on those who, a few hours previous, thought it would be a great hardship to remain many days longer on the key. There now seemed to be no immediate necessity for departure, and all hands went to work with a will.

After making a complete circuit of the island, and deciding that the boat-building operations should be carried on at the north, or shoal side, breakfast was ready, and when that important meal had been eaten the work of putting up the Mermaid's mainsail as a stationary camp was begun. The old tent was to be used as a kitchen, and in it the provisions and cooking utensils were placed, Chloe being installed as the presiding genius, for Jake's services would be required in the work of unloading the schooner.

Thus the first day was spent, and at night-fall Content Key looked like a homestead rather than a desolate reef. Two tents, fully protected from heavy winds by timbers driven firmly into the sand, were up. A considerable amount of lumber had been carried to the ship-yard, and all was in readiness for taking out the Mermaid's cargo.

Everything was done in "ship-shape fashion," as Jake expressed it in a tone of most decided satisfaction while they were eating supper. The edges of the main tent were buried deep in the sand, and weighted down with the schooner's chain-cable to steady it in case of a storm, while one end had been partitioned off for the exclusive use of old Chloe, Gertie and the cat. The kitchen was lashed even more firmly than before, and fully supplied with provisions, while two full water-breakers stood just outside, thus insuring a plentiful supply of that precious liquid whatever might happen.

It was a pleasing contrast with that scene which four of the castaways had looked upon the morning previous, and all hands felt remarkably cheerful despite the many reasons which could have been found for sadness.

“De Lawd has been wonderful good to us po’ sinful creeters,” old Chloe said devoutly, as the whole party were resting from the labors of the day in the main tent, which was lighted by the schooner’s lanterns, “an’ ef He ain’t done gone forgot us, we oughter show a little bit of respec’ kase ob His goodness.”

“You’re right, aunty,” Captain Irwin replied heartily, “and I ought to be ashamed to wait until an old woman like you reminds me of my duty. We are pretty poor stuff if we’re not willing to acknowledge our debts after so many good fellows have gone to Davy Jones’ locker, and there never were six people who had greater cause for gratitude.”

Then the captain offered a simple but soul-felt prayer, which old Chloe interrupted with many a fervent “bress de Lawd,” and when it was ended all probably felt as Jake privately expressed himself to Ben, “as if they hadn’t been doin’ any more’n the square thing.”

It was unnecessary to stand watch, since they were in no danger of being intruded upon, and all hands laid down with the low murmur of the placid sea singing them to sleep, while high in the heavens the fair moon looked upon a scene in which appeared to be pictured perfect peace.

The Castaways — Chapter XVI

Adieu To Content Key

On the following morning work was begun under the new system. Gertie and old Chloe had quite as much as they could do in or around the tents. Jake, Ben and Tom Johnson commenced taking out the cargo, while Captain Irwin paid no attention to anything save boat-building.

“I am allowing that we sha’n’t have another norther for some time,” the latter said while they were eating breakfast on this, the first day of wrecking. “We’ve had two pretty near together, an’ according to the weather prophets, there’ll be a long spell of clear sky now. If that comes true we shall be able to save all the cargo, and in order to reap the fruits of our labor, it is necessary we should retain possession of the goods.”

“I don’t reckon there is anybody round here who would try to take ’em away from us,” Jake said with a laugh.

“Perhaps not, but suppose all hands should leave the island and go to Key West? Then I fancy it would be a race among the wreckers as to who should get here first.”

“What are you drivin’ at?” Jake asked, unable to gain the slightest clew as to the captain’s meaning.

“Instead of all trying to leave on a large craft, we’ll build a small boat, and after the work of wrecking has been done, one or two only will start for Key West to make arrangements with the underwriters. By such a course we shall be obliged to remain on this reef quite a while longer, but that won’t be much of a hardship considering the amount of money to be gained from the sale of the Mermaid’s cargo.”

No one made any protest against this plan. All had such implicit confidence in the captain’s judgment, that even old Chloe was ready to follow his instructions to the letter without so much as a hint of her desire to return home or to see Moses. So far as Jake and Ben were concerned, it made but little difference where they stayed providing they could reach the main land if it should become necessary; and Gertie, having no fear of being again obliged to assist in the patent medicine business, was well content to remain until he should give the word for departure.

The work which was thus begun on the second morning after the stranding of the Mermaid, continued without interruption, except on the Sabbath, when all hands indulged in the luxury of a well-earned rest, and it was on one of these idle days, when the task appeared to be fully half-performed, that Ben laid before the captain a matter which had been troubling him as the time for leaving Content Key drew near.

"What is to become of Gertie when we get back to New York? Now that her step-father is dead she won't have any home, unless those friends with whom she lived are willin' to let her stay with them."

"You have got considerable money of your own," Captain Irwin replied with a smile, "and could do a good deal toward her support."

"I'll agree to give her every cent father left, for I can earn my own livin' without much trouble."

"Perhaps there won't be any necessity for such a sacrifice on your part, providing she and Chloe will agree to a plan which I have in mind."

"I will do whatever you think best," Gertie said quickly; "but I don't want you to feel that I expect to be taken care of, for I can work as well as Ben."

"I have no home," Captain Irwin said, speaking very seriously, "and I want one, although I'm not ashore very much of the time. It is necessary Ben should have an abiding place when he goes to school, as I intend he shall this winter, and it seems as if now was a good time to start just such a harbor as I need. Madame Servoise, one of the sweetest and neatest old French ladies I ever met, is living in New York, and I know from a conversation with her just before we sailed, that she would take charge of a house for me. I propose to hire a neat little cottage, and make up a family by adopting Gertie as a sister for Ben. Now that her step-father is dead she has neither home nor relatives, and there is no reason why she should not consult her own pleasure in the matter. Chloe can come with us, unless her Moses has other plans regarding her future; she will be captain of the kitchen, and Jake may be mate whenever he's ashore."

There was no necessity of asking if the listeners assented to this proposition. The approval pictured on their faces was so decidedly unqualified, that from that moment the matter was considered as settled, and many were the conversations which Gertie and Ben held on the subject during their leisure moments before leaving Content Key, when they laid famous plans for the future.

"I'se done gwine to lib wid de chillun no matter what dat wuffless Mose say 'bout it," and old Chloe emphasized her words by a vigorous wave of the skillet above her head as she gave Jake her views regarding the captain's proposition that same evening. "When a po' nigger woman gits ole now'days she ain't got no whar to lay her head, an' de cap'in sha'n't nebber want fur good cookin' while I'se able to stan' ober de fire."

"If you'd only let me tell you one or two things that I know better'n you do, it would----"

Jake was not allowed to conclude the rather egotistical remark. While he believed himself to be the better cook, old Chloe looked at the matter in an entirely different light, and he was forced to leave the tent very quickly in order to avoid a blow from the skillet.

The work went on without intermission, however, despite the plans all were making regarding the future, and in due course of time the Mermaid's cargo was not only landed, but secured in such a manner that however severe a storm might arise there would be no danger of its being blown away.

The boat-building had also received due attention from Captain Irwin, and when the little party of wreckers begun to tear the hulk to pieces, a seaworthy craft was finished. It was not large enough to carry all the castaways to Key West, nor was it intended for such a purpose; but two men could sail in it among the keys without inconvenience, and sloop-rigged as she was, there could be no question as to the safety of those who manned her.

It was agreed that the captain and Johnson should make the voyage, leaving the others behind to hold possession of the goods until an agreement for salvage had been made, and on the same day of the launch the journey was begun, the remainder of the party feeling decidedly lonely as the little craft sailed swiftly away and they were once more the only dwellers upon a reef.

They were very far, however, from being in as desperate a condition as at any time before the Mermaid came ashore, and, unless some unforeseen accident should occur, all knew that it would only be a question of comparatively a few hours before the journey to New York could be commenced.

"You'll see us again in two or three days," Captain Irwin shouted as the rudely-built sloop left the shore; but those on the key hardly believed that such would be the case until it was proved a fact.

When the castaways were once more the only occupants of the key it was impossible to repress a certain sense of loneliness, even though they had every

reason to believe that Captain Irwin would return at some time, even if not quite as soon as he had promised. To old Chloe, Gertie and Ben the awkward-looking boat seemed all too frail for the shortest voyage in those treacherous waters, and Jake was not without certain misgivings in case a norther should make a sudden descent upon the gulf.

These fears, however, had a very large germ of hope behind them compared to the terrible desolateness which they had experienced while in doubt as to whether any one would discover their whereabouts, and each tried hard to appear cheerful.

Jake proposed that they vary the somewhat limited bill of fare by a dinner of oysters, large quantities of which hung to such branches of the mangrove trees as trailed in the water, and when the little boat had disappeared in the distance, after sailing swiftly before the light breeze, he and Ben started off to gather this somewhat unusual fruit, while old Chloe, Gertie and the kitten returned to the main tent.

The dinner of shell-fish was a pleasing success, and after it had been eaten the occupants of Content Key gave themselves up to the charm of idleness, for from the morning when the Mermaid came ashore, every one had been hard at work, with not a moment's cessation, save during the hours of darkness.

When night came the tent was brilliantly illuminated with every lantern they could find, for the absence of two from the small party left a wofully large vacancy, and it seemed as if the cheering rays of light gave a certain sense of companionship.

"I'll tell you what we'll do, Ben," Jake said as he carefully filled and lighted his pipe, after the evening meal had been eaten and the flaps of the camp were opened that the warmth of a fire at the outside might be fully enjoyed, for the heavy dew caused the warm air to seem chill and raw. "The tide will be full about ten o'clock, an' you an' I'll have a regular turtle-hunt. It's pretty late in the season, but I reckon we'll find enough to pay for the trouble, an' seein's how we can sleep all we want to for the next two or three days, it don't make much difference whether we're awake half the night or not."

As may be supposed, Ben was perfectly willing to participate in anything which promised even a semblance of sport, and old Chloe no longer felt averse to being left with Gertie and the alleged supernatural cat, for long companionship with that harmless animal during the time while the others were engaged saving the Mermaid's cargo, had taught her that she was innocent of voodooism.

To one who has never engaged in the business of catching turtles, it would seem as if there would be at least considerable excitement attending it, and Ben was of this opinion until the events of the evening proved the contrary. Patience is the chief thing necessary, and it is by no means pleasant to lie among the sand until one of these huge shell-fish comes up out of the water to deposit her eggs. Then the "sport" consists simply in turning her on her back at the exact moment when she starts for the sea again, and after that, a weary time of waiting for another.

If there was but little pleasure to be extracted from this plan of Jake's, it resulted in quite an addition to the castaways' larder, for when the tide had so far receded that it was not probable any more would visit the key, the hunters had four captives and a store of eggs which looked absolutely enormous.

"We'll keep three alive till Captain Irwin comes back," Jake said in a tone of satisfaction as they went toward the tent, leaving the turtles on their backs without fear of an escape, "an' I reckon he won't find much fault at bein' fed on soup for a while."

The greater portion of the following day was spent in conveying the eggs to the tent that they might be kept reasonably cool, and in building a pool where three of the huge captives could enjoy a bath without possibility of taking unceremonious leave of those who proposed to convert them into delicacies for the table.

After this work had been done Jake refused to exert himself any further. He needed a rest, so he said, and was fully determined to take a long one, for when Captain Irwin returned there would be plenty of hard labor; therefore he remained idle until the morning of the fourth day, exactly seventy-two hours after the little boat left the beach, at which time Ben announced the welcome fact that a craft of some kind was in sight.

It was quite a while before the anxious watchers could determine the true character of the tiny speck far away to the westward, but by noon there was no longer any question that the absent ones were returning.

A tug towing a lighter was what Ben had sighted, and the time for leaving Content Key was very near at hand.

At sunset both crafts were anchored in shoal water to the northward of the coral reef, and Captain Irwin was enjoying his share of the turtle soup as he related in detail the incidents of his visit to Key West.

"Our boat sailed like a clipper," he said, when the castaways gathered around as he sat in the tent with supper spread out on a piece of canvas. "I

didn't think we could do very much with her except before the wind, but she laid up to it like a yacht. We were made fast to the dock in Key West eighteen hours after leaving here, and the visit to the underwriters was finished early next morning. I have left the whole matter in the hands of a responsible firm, and we shall get all that belongs to us without fear of being cheated."

"How long do you reckon it'll be before we can start from here?" Jake asked, as if it was of the greatest importance that he should get away at the earliest possible moment.

"Three days will see the work done, I fancy. We couldn't get much of a crew, but there are four of us, which will give a pretty good working force, and by swinging the lighter well inshore it won't be such a very heavy job."

"Den we'se gwine up Norf inter dat house what you tole 'bout?"

"Yes, aunty, as soon as the business is finished in Key West we'll start, and you can count on seeing Moses very soon."

"I ain't got no call ter hunt roun' fur him," old Chloe said angrily. "Ef de wuffless chile wants ter see his mammy, he mus' fin' her, kase I wouldn't done gone got wrecked ef it hadn't been 'count ob his nonsense."

"Then you wouldn't have seen us, nor be thinking about that wonderful home Captain Irwin is going to get for our especial benefit," Gertie said laughingly.

"You'se right, honey, an' I won't break out agin him any mo' kase ob dat. De Lawd's bin mighty good to dis ole nigger by rasin' up sich fren's for her, an' de leas' she kin do is ter hole her tongue."

At this point the conversation was interrupted by the captain of the steamer, who had come to consult with Captain Irwin as to the best method of conducting the work which was to be begun at daybreak next morning, and the castaways left the tent to view the key that seemed suddenly to have been converted into a populous island. With the crews of the lighter and tug roaming around on shore, it was difficult to remember what a desolate place it had once been, and as Ben said, "it made him feel queer to see so many people."

It was late in the evening before the visitors and castaways settled down to rest, and the sun had not yet showed his face above the sea next morning when the shrill whistle of the tug called all hands to work.

The summons told how nearly the time of their imprisonment had come to an end, and every one of the castaways was on the alert at the first sound of the signal.

The Castaways — Chapter XVII

A Head Wind

Chloe and Gertie were the only ones on the key not busily engaged in removing the cargo of the Mermaid and such of her tackle as was of sufficient value to warrant the labor. Even the cook of the tug joined in this work, and the old woman had quite as much as she could do to prepare the meals for this large party.

It was necessary to carry the goods to the water's edge and then raft them a distance of four or five hundred yards to where the wrecking crafts lay at anchor. The men were divided into two gangs or crews, one of which attended to the water portion of the transportation while the others remained on shore, and Jake and Ben would have joined the first party but for old Chloe's emphatic protest.

"I'se gwine onto one ob dem ar' little boats right away ef you an' Ben fool roun' in de water," she said when Jake proposed to "ship as one of the raft crews."

"What's the matter, aunty?" the ex-cook of the Sea Queen asked in surprise. "It can't make any difference where we work."

"I'se done gone got frou takin' any resks," the old woman replied sagely. "Nobody ebber knows what's gwine to happen, an' I don' wan' ter be lef' here alone same's I was on de Cymoon ship."

It was useless for Jake to explain that there was no possibility that either she or Gertie would be deserted. Chloe remembered only too well the morning when she discovered that she was the only person left on board the brig, and much against his inclination Jake was forced to volunteer for the most laborious portion of the task--that of carrying the hides across the hot sands.

The work which was thus begun continued without intermission, save during the hours of darkness, until two o'clock in the afternoon of the third day, when everything saved from the Mermaid was aboard the wrecking crafts.

On that morning no one thought an attempt would be made to get under weigh for Key West until the following day, even though the task was so nearly accomplished; but before noon there was such a decided change in the

weather that the master of the tug and Captain Irwin held a serious consultation.

The wind, which at sunrise was blowing gently from the northwest, increased in violence each hour until it was half a gale by noon, and there was every danger the lighter would be forced onto the shore unless her position was changed. Such a catastrophe meant a total loss of all the goods upon which so much time and labor had been spent, and immediate steps were taken to avert the threatened danger.

The tents were rolled up at once. Ben's legacy, which came to him with the story of bitter suffering, was carried to the steamer in the box where it had remained so long, and before the last of the wreckage was loaded on the lighter, old Chloe and Gertie were notified that the time for leaving Content Key had arrived.

This work of embarkation, which could have been so easily accomplished a few hours previous, was now not only difficult, but, in the old negress' eyes, extremely dangerous, and nothing but Captain Irwin's sternly uttered threat that she should be left behind caused her to make the slightest effort toward helping herself. Instead of a placid sea the foam-crested waves were rolling inland with very nearly the same fury as on the day after the norther, and the heavily laden vessel was tossed about on them until the stout hawsers were strained to their utmost tension.

A boat from the steamer was brought around to the eastern end of the key, where the surf was least furious, and to this point Aunt Chloe, Gertie, with the cat in her arms, Jake and Ben bent their steps, the old woman declaring with many a groan and pious ejaculation that she should never be able to reach the tug alive and safe.

"You won't by standin' here howlin', that's certain," Jake said when they were on the beach, and the sailors, knee-deep in the sea, eager to conclude what they evidently considered a very disagreeable duty. "Ben an' I'll swing you aboard in a jiffy if you'll try to help yourself the least bit."

"I'se done gone gwine ter wait till de wind is frou blowin'," and, forgetting Captain Irwin's threat, the old woman seated herself on the sand with a grim look of determination written on her black features.

"You'll have to wait a long spell if you don't get aboard lively," one of the men shouted. "Our captain won't fool 'round a great while with the wind kickin' up such a bobbery, an' we've got to start mighty quick or this trip will count for nothin'."

It was as if Aunt Chloe had not heard a word, for she made no attempt to change her position, and Jake said in a low tone to Ben:

“Take hold with me, lad, an’ never mind how much she yells.”

Then, before the old woman had time to understand what was being done, Ben and Jake seized her much as if she was simply an unwieldy piece of merchandise, and despite the shrill, vigorous screams, deposited her in the stern of the small boat, where she sat bolt upright in silent wrath until Gertie and the cat were taken aboard.

Not a word did she speak when, after tossing about on the angry-looking waves nearly half an hour, during which both Gertie and Ben were decidedly frightened, they arrived at the tug. Here a rope was fastened securely under her arms, and as the little craft fell in the hollow of the waves Aunt Chloe was pulled aboard like a big fish, her black face alternately exhibiting the utmost alarm and anger, but not a sound escaped her lips.

It was necessary to treat the children in the same manner, owing to the heavy seas, and by the time this was accomplished the last of the cargo had been transferred to the wrecking crafts.

The most inexperienced would have understood now that there was no time to be lost. The steamer was dancing about like a cork, flinging the waves high over her bow, or plunging into them until the deck was awash, and straining at the hempen cables which held her to the heavy lighter whose anchors were yet down. The hoarse panting of the steam-pipes, the sharp cries of command, and the trampling to and fro told the journey was about to be begun, and that no slight amount of danger would attend it could be seen from the faces of all.

Chloe, Gertie, Ben and the cat had been given quarters in a tiny cabin at the after part of the tug, and while the old woman remained seated on the floor like a charcoal statue of fear, the two children clung to the window-casing, for the violent plunging of the little craft rendered it difficult to retain a standing position, looking out at the sailors who were making every effort to get under weigh in the least possible space of time.

The lighter had her regular crew of four men on board, and when both hawsers were overhauled they set about raising the anchors, the tug starting instantly the last one left the ground.

With a clank and jar, and mighty breathing of steam, the powerful engines begun to do their work; but the strong head-wind which was rapidly increasing to a full gale, as well as the heavy load behind, prevented any very

great speed. As a matter of fact both the watchers in the cabin thought during the first ten minutes that it would be impossible for the small steamer to drag the unwieldy craft away from the reef; but slowly the two forged ahead, the waves dashing over and against them as if determined that neither should escape their fury.

Captain Irwin was in the pilot-house, Jake remained in the cook-room, and with Chloe terrified into silence, it seemed to Gertie and Ben as if they were alone watching this conflict between the forces of nature and man's handiwork.

"If this grows any worse what will become of the tug?" Gertie asked, trying hard to repress a shudder of fear. "The waves are coming over her worse than they ever did over the Sea Queen."

"It looks as if there was going to be a pretty bad storm," Ben replied cautiously, not caring to reveal the full extent of his anxiety; "but I guess she'll get through safe enough. You see a tug-boat is built strong, an' so long as her machinery holds she can go where the Sea Queen wouldn't have much show."

The sound of the children's voices so far reassured old Chloe that she managed, despite the violent pitching and plunging of the steamer, to make her way to one of the stationary arm-chairs, and after clambering into this she was fully occupied trying to remain in the seat, a task by no means easy of accomplishment when the tug would straighten the hawsers with a snap and sudden stop that on two occasions sent the cat rolling across the floor like a foot-ball.

Three hours passed and yet the two children remained at the window as if fascinated by the scene, which grew more wild and tempestuous each moment, and when the gloom of the coming night caused the laboring lighter to look like little more than a shadow against the darker background, Captain Irwin came into the cabin, greatly to Ben's relief.

"Why don't you light up here?" he asked cheerily as, after quite a severe struggle, he succeeded in closing the door. "The storm won't seem so bad if you can't look out on the water."

"I never thought of lamps," Ben said with a long-drawn sigh. "Gertie and I were watching the lighter. Do you think this boat can tow her?"

"If the storm increases, as it threatens to do now, I'm afraid we shall have to cast her adrift," the captain replied in a low tone. "We are only barely holding our own now, and a full head of steam on. With more wind she would soon succeed in dragging us back to the shoals of Content Key."

"How will they get the crew off?" Gertie asked inquiringly.

"There is no possibility of doing that. If it becomes necessary to let go the hawsers they must take their chances like any other sailors in a storm; but we won't talk about that until it has to be done."

Then Captain Irwin lighted the swinging-lamp; but the tiny flame looked anything rather than cheerful to the occupants of the cabin as they thought of the four men who might soon be abandoned to their fate. Not for an instant did their minds dwell upon the possible pecuniary loss, which was as nothing compared with the sacrifice of human life.

Outside the wind shrieked and howled as if calling all its forces together that a combined assault might be made upon the laboring vessels. Now and then the waves would strike the panting tug a blow which caused her to quiver from stem to stern, and then remain motionless for a second like some frightened animal who seeks in vain a way of escape from relentless enemies.

"How near have we got to Key West?" Gertie asked after a long pause.

"We've hardly started, my child. During the last two hours no headway has been made, and our island is probably not more than ten or twelve miles astern."

"Pears like we's nebber gwine ter get away frum dat wuffless place," Aunt Chloe said, speaking for the first time since coming aboard so unceremoniously.

"If we can hold our own to-night I reckon it will----"

The captain ceased speaking very suddenly, for at that instant a series of piercing whistles was heard from the steam-pipe, and he knew it was the signal agreed upon that the crew of the lighter might understand they were to be abandoned.

An instant later the trampling of many feet sounded on the deck, and Jake burst into the room, the wind slamming the door behind him with a report like a pistol-shot.

"All our work is to count for nothin'!" he cried. "They're goin' to cut the lighter adrift, an' we can whistle for the salvage."

"God have mercy on her crew!" Captain Irwin said devoutly as he went on deck, and an instant later the sound of axes was heard as the heavy hawsers were cut apart.

"Are those poor fellows to be left to drown?" Gertie asked with quivering lip.

“We couldn’t help them if they were in the water this very minute,” Jake replied, “but about the drownin’ part I ain’t so sure. If they’ve got any sense, I don’t see what’s to hinder ’em from runnin’ up the gulf. The lighter is loaded so deep that she won’t make a great deal of leeway, an’ though I ain’t the sailor that I am cook, I’d know enough to try a close-reefed mainsail an’ jib.”

Ben pressed his face against the glass in the vain hope of learning what steps the abandoned men were taking to aid themselves, but the gloom of evening and the smother of spray prevented him from seeing even those who were at work just outside.

A decided change in the motion of the steamer as she plunged down one wave and up another without that sickening, sudden halt which had so impeded her headway, told that the unwieldy craft was no longer towing astern. Unless an accident should happen to the machinery the tug could ride out the gale in safety, but what would be the fate of those who had been abandoned the little party in the cabin could only conjecture. The shoals of Content Key were yet so near that the lighter might strike before her crew were able to show the smallest piece of canvas to the wind, and in that event their doom would surely be sealed.

It was a time when the most cheering words fail to give comfort, and the four who twice previously had been tossed about on the gulf at the mercy of wind and wave, remained silent and affrighted, waiting for the night, which had but just begun, to come to an end.

The Castaways — Chapter XVIII

At Key West

The hours of that night passed as if each minute was made up of ten times the usual number of seconds, and the dreary monotony of waiting was not broken by the entrance of any one into the cabin. Captain Irwin remained in the pilot-house, and the crew of the tug were in their own quarters or on deck forward, therefore the castaways, who the morning previous believed all their troubles had come to an end, were left to the agony of suspense.

The clanking of the machinery, which subsided sensibly after the hawsers were cut, told that the captain of the steamer was making no effort to do more than “hold his own” against the gale that he might be in the vicinity to search for the lighter when the wind abated.

In this manner, tossed upward, sinking into the hollows of the waves, or thrown from side to side, but riding buoyantly despite all the buffeting, the little craft labored on during the hours of darkness, and when the morning dawned gray and forbidding, the wind no longer raged with the same fury as during the past twelve hours.

“We’ve seen the worst of it I reckon, lad,” Jake said as he and Ben stood by one of the windows watching for the first signs of day. “The clouds have already begun to break away, an’ when the sun gets up there’ll be blue enough in the sky to make a Dutchman a pair of trousers.”

“Do you mean that the storm is nearly over?” Gertie asked, not understanding the ex-cook’s prediction.

“That’s the size of it,” Jake replied, “an’ if I ain’t way out of my reckonin’, we’ll be puttin’ about pretty soon to hunt for the lighter.”

“Bress de Lawd!” old Chloe exclaimed fervently as she stroked Gertie’s hair. “I don’ know nuffin’ ob de trousers Massa Jake’s tellin’ ’bout, but I’s powerful anxious to see de blue sky once mo’, an’ to git out ob dis h’yar little boat.”

“It will be a good while before you’ll have a chance to do that, aunty, if we go round for the lighter,” Ben said, feeling that it was possible to speak cheerfully once more.

The old woman made no reply, probably because she was disappointed in the hope of being able to land that very day, and Gertie joined the watchers near the window, all three looking eagerly out at the heavy clouds.

An hour later there could be no question but that Jake's predictions would be verified. The sky was clearing rapidly, and when the sun rose it was possible to see his face, gleaming warm and friendly amid the misty vapor. The seas still ran high, as was to be expected, but the little steamer had shown her ability to ride them so well that the towering crests no longer caused the castaways any alarm.

Captain Irwin came into the cabin worn and haggard, but bringing tidings which cheered those who had previously been so despondent.

"We are all right now," he said cheerily. "It was nothing more than a wind storm, and if the lighter can be found no one will be much the worse for a bad night."

"Are we going to hunt for her?"

"Just as soon as it clears away so we can have some idea where the steamer is. I believe we're still within a dozen miles of our key, and I hope the lighter may be between here and Tampa. Jake, suppose you go forward and see what's to be had in the way of breakfast. Chloe and Gertie must eat in the cabin rather than run the risk of a wetting by going to the mess-room."

From this time on the passengers felt no fear. The sky was clearing rapidly, and when the crew began repairing such damage as had been done by the storm, the activity and animation everywhere around caused even Chloe to look upon the situation as one wholly devoid of danger.

Jake brought aft an ample supply of food for breakfast, and before the meal was eaten the steamer's bow was turned toward Content Key once more, the captain intending to run down to shoal water and then make his way up the gulf in the direction of Cape Sable.

During the day the tug cruised as had been arranged, without seeing the craft all were so eager to sight, and none of the castaways received more attention than the cat. From the cook to the greenest deck-hand, all united in caring for her welfare, and her time of fasting, when she was driven ashore or made her way out of some turtling schooner, must have been forgotten in this long thanksgiving day, for she received full share of every dainty served.

When night came there was no longer any chance that the lighter had gone ashore on the reefs in the vicinity of her starting point. It was possible she had drifted directly up Barnes' Sound, but this chance seemed so remote that the

captain had no intention of looking in that direction until search elsewhere failed to reveal the missing craft.

So far as saving time was concerned, it was well he carried out the original plan, for at ten o'clock next morning, when all hands were acting as lookouts, the lighter was sighted at anchor near the entrance to Hillsboro Bay, and two hours later she was made fast to the tug once more, no damage having been done save the loss of a small portion of the load, which had been thrown overboard when she was first cast adrift.



There was no time for the crew to tell any lengthy story regarding the incidents of the night, however, for as soon as the hawsers were spliced the steamer started for Key West again, and the weather gave promise that the journey would have no further interruption.

In this case the weather “signs” were read correctly. During the next seventy-two hours there was not at any time more than a summer breeze, and the last half of the trip was made over the most placid of seas. As a matter of course, the progress was slow; but that had been expected, and Captain Irwin was perfectly content when, on the morning of the fourth day, the tug passed inside Rebecca shoal to approach Key West from the south, through the main channel.

It was late in the evening when the wrecking crafts entered the harbor, and, quite naturally, the castaways had no idea of landing until next morning; but Captain Irwin held a serious consultation with them in the cabin when everything was made snug for the night.

"We should be foolish to think of leaving Key West until after the question of salvage has been settled," he said by way of preface, and Jake nodded his head gravely to show that he agreed to the first proposition. "Now that matter may occupy two or three weeks, and the expense at a hotel of such a party as ours will be considerable."

"We can't stay aboard here all the time," Jake added quickly.

"You're right; but we can hire a furnished house, and thus save considerable money. By so doing we shall be decidedly more comfortable, and it will make no very great difference how long we are delayed."

There was no necessity of asking whether the plan met with the approbation of the others for the answer could be read on their faces; but the ex-cook of the Sea Queen thought a reply was needed, and spoke for his companions as well as himself.

"We'll be satisfied with whatever you say is best, captain, an' 'cordin' to my way of thinkin', nothin' could be better'n hirin' a house, 'cause I don't like the style of cookin' in these parts."

"Then you will all remain on board in the morning until I see what can be done, and as it's pretty late now we'd better turn in."

The task of finding a temporary home for the castaways was neither a long nor a difficult one. It was yet too early in the season for winter visitors, consequently there were plenty of furnished cottages which could be hired at a moderate price, and an hour after the cook of the tug served breakfast Captain Irwin announced that the arrangements had been made.

"I've found a neat little house of six rooms which overlooks the harbor, and I should not be sorry to stay in it all winter. There is a carriage on the dock, so that Chloe, Gertie and the cat may ride, and in it can also be carried Ben's box."

An hour later the little party were in their temporary home. Captain Irwin and Ben had gone out to purchase provisions, while Jake helped old Chloe and Gertie "set things to rights," as the latter said, and the cat stalked gravely around inspecting the new place of abode.

"Bress de Lawd we'se in a house once mo', an' kin lay down widout bein' 'fraid de seas will knock us out ob bed," old Chloe said with a sigh of relief as

she ceased work a few moments and gazed around with delight. "I ain't hardly knowed a minit's peace sence dat wuffless Mose argered me inter startin' up Norf, an' if we didn't havter go on de water any mo', I'd feel jest as comfortable as a coon in de gum tree."

"Wouldn't you like to see your Moses again?" Gertie asked.

"Deed chile, I don' hanker arter it so much dat I'd like fur to get in dem little boats any mo'. I'se gwine ter let you write him dat his ole mammy's h'yar, an' he kin come ef he wants ter see her."

Gertie was quite as well contented as the old woman. She had implicit confidence in Captain Irwin's promise to care for her, and it was a matter of little moment whether they remained there or continued on to New York. Jake, however, was not so happy; he hoped the question of salvage might be settled without delay, for while they were on shore old Chloe would be "captain of the kitchen," and he was eager to be in command of a well-appointed galley once more.

"I allers did hate to putter round where wimen are bossin' a job," he said confidentially to the cat when the negress insisted on taking entire charge of the culinary affairs, "an' the sooner we're afloat agin the better I'll be satisfied."

He had walked into the yard toward the front gate while thus complaining, and on glancing up the street all his imaginary woes were banished for the time being by seeing Ben coming at full speed, with a look on his face which betokened some trouble or disaster.

"Ahoy there! What's the matter now, lad?" he cried as he opened the gate and the boy entered like one who is nearly exhausted by long and rapid traveling. "Has anything happened to Captain Irwin?"

"No--he's--well--enough," Ben replied with difficulty, forced to pause at each word because he was literally gasping for breath. "Dr. Harlan's alive an' in this very town!"

"Dr. Harlan!" Jake cried, stepping forward quickly and seizing Ben by the arms as if fearing he had suddenly taken leave of his senses. "Do you mean to tell me Gertie's step-father, what went down in the Sea Queen, is here?"

"He didn't sink with the vessel, 'cause he's in this town an' as much alive as I am. He told Captain Irwin he hung onto a couple of timbers till the next day, when he was picked up by a steamer an' brought here."

"An' the captain spoke to a man what's jest as good as dead?"

"Of course he did. We went into a grocery store an' he followed us."

"Did you say anything to him, Ben?"

"No, 'cause while he was talkin' with the captain I run so's to get Gertie out of the way."

"Look here, Ben," Jake said impressively, and glancing quickly around like one who fancies he may see some terrible sight. "Are you sure it wasn't his ghost? Did you touch him to find out? Tim Jinks once knew of a ghost what kept right on about his business, an' folks didn't know he was dead for two or three days."

"Don't be foolish," Ben said, his fear of Dr. Harlan making him nervous and impatient. "He wasn't any more of a ghost than you are, an' it won't be many minutes before he comes here to take Gertie away. Captain Irwin winked at me when the man begun to talk, an' I knew he meant that I was to get home quick."

"But see here, lad, I don't seem to understand this thing yet. I thought the captain was the only one who got off of the Sea Queen."

"You know now that this doctor escaped, an' what can we do to prevent him from gettin' hold of Gertie?"

This important question so plainly asked seemed to bring the ex-cook to his senses more quickly than any argument could have done, and he said very decidedly, as he shut the gate with a vicious slam:

"I'd like to see him get into this house, that's all. You lock every window an' door, while I stay here on guard. If he passes me it'll be 'cause he's a smarter man than I think for, an' I reckon there'll be a chance to pay him back for some of the airs he put on while we was aboard the old Sea Queen."

Ben waited only long enough to assure himself that Jake fully understood the extent of the danger which menaced, and then he ran into the house, frightening old Chloe so much by his abrupt entrance that she nearly fell over the stove.

There was no incredulity on the part of these listeners as he repeated the story. Gertie's face grew pale at hearing that the man whom she feared so much was yet alive, and Chloe could not find words strong enough to express her sympathy as she held the child closely in her arms.

"He will come here to take me away, and I was so happy! Oh, how can I go with him--how can I?"

"You sha'n't," Ben cried in a tone of determination, suddenly remembering that he had neglected to carry into execution the orders given by Jake. "We'll lock every door, an' then see if he can get in."

“I’se gwine to put some water on de stove, honey, an’ I’ll scald his fingers suah, ef he touches de shortest hair on your head,” and old Chloe arose for the purpose of carrying out the threat just as Ben returned to report that he had barricaded the house to the extent of his ability.

Desperate Measures

Ben's surprise at seeing old Chloe busying herself about what he fancied were household duties at a time when Gertie was in such peril, caused him to ask impatiently:

"What's the use of cooking now? We'd better be trying to help her instead of thinking about eating."

"I'se gwine ter keep dat man away frum here ef dere's any vartue in hot water," the old woman replied with a menacing gesture. "Jas' don' trubble 'bout yer old mammy; she kin drike white trash out ob her kitchen, I reckon."

"But you mustn't do anything like that, aunty!" Ben cried in alarm. "They would surely arrest you for scalding a man."

"Nebber you min', honey. I'se gwine ter keep 'em away frum dat lubley chile ef dey does 'rest, an' den we'll see ef dey kin lug de whole ob Mammy Chloe to de caboose. I tells you, honey, I'd be a powerful big load for 'em to tote ef I didn't wanter go."

The old woman was so firmly convinced of the efficacy of her plan that she continued the preparations despite Ben's protests, and if Dr. Harlan had presented himself just then it is more than probable he would have met with a very warm reception.

Fortunately, however, Captain Irwin came first, and one look at his face was sufficient to convince Gertie that the danger which threatened her was quite as great as Ben had represented.

"He was sure you were with me when he saw Ben, and demanded that I give you up," the captain said, understanding from the appearance of those in the kitchen that they knew whom he had met.

"And must I go?" Gertie asked, the tears filling her eyes despite the brave efforts to keep them back.

"Not if I can prevent it. I'm on shore now, where the loss of two or three weeks' time don't matter much, and he must appeal to the law, for I shall resist any and every attempt to take you away."

"Do you think he will come here?" Ben asked.

"There is no doubt but that he followed me, for I refused to say where we were living, and it would not surprise me to see him at any moment--that is," the captain added with a grim smile, "if he succeeds in getting past Jake."

"Has he got the right to make her go with him?" Ben asked in a tremulous tone.

"I'm afraid so, my boy. At least, the law will undoubtedly give him the right unless we can show that he is an unfit person to have the care of a child. I will wait here until we find out whether he intends to attempt any force, and if nothing has been done by noon I'll hunt up a good lawyer to take charge of the case."

There was no necessity of waiting so long, for the captain had hardly ceased speaking when the sound of angry conversation from the front yard told that Jake had a visitor.

"Don't be frightened; he sha'n't do you any harm," the captain said reassuringly as Gertie turned her pale face toward him imploringly. "I'll go out, and you lock the door behind me, Ben, for it won't do to take many chances."

Then he left the room, Ben following his instructions to the letter, and during the next half-hour not a word was spoken by the three occupants of the kitchen, save when old Chloe crooned some negro melody as she smoothed Gertie's hair while the child clung to her in an agony of apprehension.

When Captain Irwin reached the front yard, after passing entirely around the house in order that he might have time to make up his mind as to what he should do or say, Jake was entrenched behind the gate, threatening Dr. Harlan with his clinched fists whenever the latter made any attempt to enter.

"What do you mean by keeping my girl a prisoner in this house, and preventing me from seeing her?" the now thoroughly angry man cried as Captain Irwin appeared on the scene.

"She is not a prisoner, but has appealed to me for protection, and I am all the more willing to grant it because I know what you would force her to do. I presume I can prevent you from entering my house if I do not choose to entertain such people."

"I'll take her out of there if I have to break down the doors," the quack cried, furious with rage.

"And I shall see to it that you do not have the chance," Captain Irwin replied, secretly delighted because the doctor had given an opportunity of entering a complaint against him.

"You have got the upper hand now, for there are two against one," Dr. Harlan said in a snarling tone; "but I have rights as the husband of her mother which the law will force you to respect, and it won't be many hours before you shall be made to understand that fact."

As he ceased speaking he walked away in what was evidently intended to be a dignified manner, and Captain Irwin said hurriedly to Jake:

"Of course he can do as he says, and while the case is being tried--for I will fight him to the last--the court may give him the custody of the child. I am going to consult a lawyer, and perhaps we may render him powerless by having him put under bonds to keep the peace, for he has publicly threatened to break into the house. Stand guard here while I'm gone, and do not let any one enter, except, of course, an officer should come with authority to take her away. Above all, don't give that man a hold on you by striking him, unless it is absolutely in self-defence."

"You needn't worry about that part of it," Jake replied grimly. "I'll stay on this side the fence, an' I reckon the law gives me the right to defend your property."

Then the captain walked swiftly down the street in the same direction as that taken by the doctor, and the ex-cook, fully impressed with the importance of his position, remained stiff and erect, like a soldier who expects an immediate attack from the enemy.

Not knowing what was taking place outside, for Gertie would not allow Ben to leave the room even an instant in order to peer through the front window, the occupants of the kitchen remained in painful suspense for a long time, hearing nothing save the ordinary noise of the street, until a loud, peremptory knock at the door brought all three to their feet in the highest state of excitement and alarm.

"Don' unlock it, honey; don' touch de latch, kase it mus' be dat drefful man."

"It's me! Jake! Open the door quick," a familiar voice cried, and an instant later the ex-cook entered with a sheet of paper in his hand.

"Here's a letter I jest got from the captain, an' I can't make any sense out of the thing. He told me he was goin' to see a lawyer, an' while I was watchin' for the big-whiskered doctor, a nigger boy brought this. Read it, Gertie, an' let's see if all three of us can't figger up some kind of a meanin'."

Gertie took the note, which had evidently been written hurriedly with a lead-pencil, and read in a trembling voice the following:

"I am advised by the most reputable lawyer here, that in all probability the child will be placed in the custody of some one appointed by the court until the case is decided, and there can be no question now but that Dr. Harlan intends to bring suit at once. In such an event he would most likely try to steal her away, knowing the law would hardly surrender her to him after we have shown the kind of a life he proposes she shall lead.

"It is positive he will not be able to so present his case that an order of any kind would be issued until late this afternoon.

"If I should be commanded to give her up, and knew where she was, it would be necessary to obey.

"Ben has plenty of money in the box he found on Content Key, and there are a number of large sail-boats here which can be purchased. Three or four people could live on one of the small islands, ten or fifteen miles north of the harbor, for several weeks without being discovered, provided they did not even tell their best friend. By that time the whole affair would be settled as we want it, with nothing more to fear from the doctor in a legal way. If a party should make an excursion to any of the keys near by, it would not be necessary to stop very long preparing an elaborate outfit, since one of them could visit Key West very often without fear of detection, and if advice was needed my attorney, Joel L. Walker, would give it free of charge. It is not safe for any one to say what Gertie ought to do, because of the questions which might be asked in court."

There was no signature to the letter; but none was needed, for all knew perfectly well who the writer was, and when Gertie ceased reading, Jake said with a long-drawn sigh:

"Now, if anybody here can make out the meanin' of that thing, I'd like to have them speak right up, for it sticks me."

"Why he wants us to run away until the case is settled," Ben replied promptly. "If Gertie isn't here she can't be taken from us, and the doctor won't have any chance to carry her off."

"If that's a fact why don't he talk right out so's we'll know exactly what to do?" and Jake looked provoked as well as mystified.

"Because he's afraid of being asked on his oath if he knows where she is. Don't you see that the letter jest the same as says so?"

"Do you believe Ben has got the right of it?" Jake asked, turning to Gertie, who appeared to have been comforted rather than alarmed at the advice.

"I'm sure he has, and the captain wants us to hurry, for he says that nothing can be done by the doctor until late in the afternoon."

Ben had not waited to discuss the matter. After replying to the ex-cook's questions, he ran into the room where his father's box had been left, took from the bag a handful of gold pieces, and returning to the kitchen gave them to Jake as he said:

"We haven't got a minute to spare unless we're willin' to run the risk of losin' Gertie. Here's money enough to buy a boat. Don't fool round tryin' to get her cheap. We'll need a little something to eat, an' stuff for a tent--perhaps you can find one all made. Be jest as quick as you can, an' when you're ready to start come back for Gertie an' me."

Jake could not have hesitated had he so desired, for Ben in his impatience to leave the key at the earliest possible moment, literally pushed him out of the room, and when the door was fastened once more, old Chloe said, as she commenced to bustle around, gathering up such provisions as had already been brought into the house:

"I don' s'pect de captin'll want dese arter we'se gone, an' dat wuffless Jake dunno noffin' 'bout gettin' 'nuff ter eat."

"Why you are to stay here, aunty. Somebody must take care of the house," Ben said in surprise.

"Deed I isn't gwine ter do any sich ting. D'yer s'pose old Chloe would let dat lubley chile go off all by herself?"

"But we have got to leave in a little boat, an' you said you wasn't going out sailin' any more."

"It's gwine ter be hard totin' my po' old bones roun' in dem aig-shells, but I'se got ter do it," and Chloe continued collecting the articles as if she considered that the matter had been finally settled.

"You are so afraid of a boat, mammy, that it's too bad to make you go with us," Gertie said as she stroked the wrinkled black hand. "Jake can cook, and I shall get along by myself very well."

"Don' talk foolish, chile, don' talk foolish. Yer po' ole mammy hab got ter go wid yer, an' dat settles de whole 'scussion."

"But what will Captain Irwin do if there's nobody here to cook for him?" Ben asked anxiously.

"De captin hab got ter grub roun' fur vittles like any odder helpless white man, kase I'se gwine ter go wid my chile."

It was evident that Chloe was growing impatient because of these attempts to dissuade her from what she considered the path of duty, and the children refrained from saying anything more on the subject.

Owing to the fact that Captain Irwin and Ben had been interrupted in their shopping at such an early hour, there was but little in the house which would be of benefit to the party, and that only what Jake had purchased while walking from the dock. It was all collected, however, and tied up into packages which could most readily be carried. When this was done old Chloe said to Ben:

"Now, honey, I wants yer ter gib yer old mammy some of dat money, so she can buy some clo'es fur dat lubley chile. She's needin' a few powerful bad, an' I kin git back afore dat lazy Jake done gone fin' a boat."

"But some one will see you, aunty."

"S'pose dey do? Dat doctor man don' know me frum any ob dese Key Wes' niggers, kase I ain't got on my bestest frock."

Ben realized the force of this argument at once, and giving the old woman four gold pieces, he opened the door leading into the back yard as he said:

"Be as quick as you can, aunty, for we must leave here the minute Jake is ready."

"Don' worry, honey, yer mammy ain't so foolish as she looks, an' she won't let de sailors be waitin'."

In this old Chloe kept her word. It hardly seemed to Gertie and Ben that she had had time to walk as far as the principal stores before she was knocking at the door for admittance and crying reassuringly:

"It's me, honey, don' be feared."

From the size of her bundle it was evident the old woman had purchased quite an extensive outfit, but before it could be examined Jake entered.

"I've got a sloop-rigged craft with a little cuddy that will hold all hands in case of a storm," he said. "She's at the dock back of this house, an' I reckon we can sneak through the small streets without much chance of the doctor's seein' us, even if he's snoopin' round in front."

"Did you get the other things?" Ben asked.

"Yes, I found a couple of pretty fair but small tents, an' I reckon there are provisions enough on board to last two or three days. We haven't got any time to lose, for it's past noon, an' it'll take five or six hours with this wind to reach such a key as we want to find."

Everything was ready for the departure, and gathering up the many packages, as well as the famous kitten, the little party left the house in which so much enjoyment had been anticipated, to become castaways once more, this time fearing pursuit as much as they had previously hoped for succor.

The Castaways — Chapter XX

Fugitives

It was possible to reach the water's edge without passing the front of the house, and Jake led the way at a rapid pace, old Chloe panting and groaning in her efforts to walk as fast as the others; but growing angry whenever a proposition was made to slacken the speed for her benefit. Each one was loaded down with bundles, and in addition Gertie carried the kitten; but all pressed forward so eagerly that in less than ten minutes they were on board the new purchase. She was a trim little craft of not more than five tons burden, but of such light draught that it would be safe to cruise in her anywhere among the keys which were situated on the shoals.

No fault could have been found with Jake's hasty bargain. The boat was sloop-rigged, with a large cockpit, and a tiny cuddy starting from just abaft the mast, in which were four bunks. Judging from appearances she was nearly new, for her sails and rigging were in the best possible condition.

"A party of sportsmen from up North brought her down here for one season's huntin' an' fishin'," Jake said as the fugitives stepped aboard, "an' I got her at a bargain. She'll carry us anywhere, an' I'd rather trust her in a storm than that lumbering old lighter we towed from Content Key."

Ben was not a good judge of such property, but he thought they had every reason to be satisfied with the purchase, more especially after being told that the price paid was only an hundred dollars, and even old Chloe appeared willing to trust her precious body on the little craft.

As may be supposed, no time was wasted in conversation. Although it seemed as if they had succeeded in giving Dr. Harlan the slip, it was possible he would appear at any moment, and matters might be very awkward for Captain Irwin if the quack should learn in which direction the little party had gone.

While Jake gave the details of his business transactions, he and Ben were loosing the canvas, and the story had hardly been told before the sloop was gliding out of the harbor toward the north, under a breeze so gentle that she sailed very nearly on an even keel.

Old Chloe, Gertie and the cat were in the cuddy, for if Dr. Harlan should chance to come on the dock before the yacht was out of sight he would hardly fail to understand the true state of the case on seeing two females aboard.

"Now, where are we going?" Ben asked, after he had done his portion of the work by trimming the canvas down, flat, for the wind was from the west.

"At this rate of sailin' we oughter be ten miles away in a couple of hours, an' we won't think of stoppin' till then. There are plenty of keys 'round here to choose from, an' we'll take the smallest we can find that has any trees on it, for we must have somethin' in the way of foliage to hide the tent."

Then, as a means of driving away the fear which was imprinted so plainly on Gertie's pale face, Jake begun to talk of Dr. Harlan's being defeated in his appeal to the law as if it was already an assured fact, and before the little craft was five miles from the shore those on board had the appearance of pleasure-seekers rather than fugitives.

At the expiration of two hours the yacht was skirting along the side of a small reef, not more than half the size of Content Key, on the north of which grew a thick clump of mangroves.

"There's where we'll land," Jake said as he shifted the helm in order to run across the shoal water and gain the shelter of the trees. "Cordin to the looks of the place we might stay here a year without bein' found. Take the tiller, Ben, while I go forward to see how much water we've got."

The little craft was of such light draught that she run to the very edge of the shore before grounding, and ten minutes later the party were in the midst of the trees selecting a site for the camp.

This task was neither long nor difficult; the mangroves grew so closely together that a shelter from the wind could be had anywhere in the thicket, and the first clear space sufficiently large to admit of spreading the canvas was the one selected.

Two small A tents, each about six feet square, had been purchased by Jake, and he said as he unrolled them ready for setting up:

"I would have got a big one if I could a' found it; but you see we were kinder pressed for time, an' it wasn't safe to be too particular. Anyway, Gertie an' aunty will have a house to themselves, an' there'll be plenty of breathin' space by dividin' the stores between the tents."

Ben believed this arrangement was much better than if one heavy canvas was to be shared by all. There would be less danger in case of a heavy wind;

the small camps could not be seen so readily from the water, and they were thus saved the labor of trying to form two rooms from a large interior.

He and Jake set about erecting the shelter even before unloading the stores, and the tents were placed side by side in such a manner that by raising the inside walls during the day the effect of a single camp was obtained.

Aunt Chloe and Gertie, seated on the sand close at hand, watched this portion of the work, and the cat scampered around the key as if rejoiced at being once more where she had perfect freedom of action, but running up to her young mistress from time to time to assure herself that there was no possibility of being deserted.

The task of taking the stores on shore occupied but a few moments after the tents were erected, and when this had been done Jake said in a tone of satisfaction:

"I reckon we'll be about as snug here as if we'd staid at Key West, an' I ain't sure but I'll like it better. Aunt Chloe an' Gertie can put the house to rights, an' after me an' Ben have seen to the yacht a bit we'll bury the water breaker so's to keep it somewhere near cool. Now, lad, let's see what can be done to hide our craft, for we don't know how soon that quack may take it in his head to look 'round the keys for us."

This was not an easy matter, for the sloop was much too heavy to be hauled upon shore, and her mast could not be unstepped without taking down all the standing rigging. After studying the question carefully for some moments, and realizing that the little craft must of a necessity remain in the water, Jake said with the air of a man who has solved a difficult problem:

"We'll anchor her close in shore, and then cover the spars and hull with mangrove branches, so she'll look like a tree when seen from a distance. It isn't likely Gertie's step-father would take the trouble of searchin' every key, an' if he doesn't see anything suspicious there won't be much danger of his coming ashore."

It was two hours before this work had been done to Jake's entire satisfaction, and then it would have required a very close scrutiny to distinguish a boat in this seeming clump of bushes which was apparently growing in the water about ten feet from the shore. It would be necessary to move the little craft further out in case of a heavy sea, but while there was no surf running she would be perfectly safe even with her bow resting on the sand. The light kedge was used to moor her, and Jake hove the cable taut, intending to let out more slack during the evening.

To land after the task had been accomplished it was necessary to wade a short distance; but that was of little consequence since the weather was warm and the water very shoal.

Then the breaker, a small cask holding about five gallons, was buried in the sand at such a depth that the wide bung was but just exposed, and the laborers were quite ready for the cold meal old Chloe had prepared.

"We'll rig up some kind of a fire-place in the morning, an' if we can't do much cookin' on it you can at least have your tea," Ben said as he did full justice to the bread and butter, boiled ham and fruit.

"I ain't gwine ter rouse any trubble," Chloe said with the air of one who fancies she is making a martyr of herself for others; "but I can't linger 'roun' here berry long widout a little sometin' hot."

"You shall have it now," Jake replied quickly, probably because he also desired a warm drink, and before the mantle of night had covered the key a steaming pot of tea was served by way of dessert to the cold supper they had enjoyed.

All of the party were tired, for the excitement had wearied as much as the labor, and when the meal was brought to a close every one felt perfectly willing to retire. A lantern was hung in Gertie and Chloe's tent, the wall of canvas dropped, and without a thought of the yacht, which was riding at a dangerously short cable, the ex-cook wrapped himself in the blankets, fully prepared for a long night's rest.

If Jake had been half as good a sailor as he claimed to be cook, his first thought would have been to care for the safety of the boat; but he was not, and with foliage enough on her spars to act as a reasonably good-sized sail, the little craft swung to and fro under the influence of the night wind, lifting the keedge with each undulation of the light swell as she slipped inch by inch into deeper water.

The feeling of security which came upon the fugitives when they succeeded in leaving Key West without being seen by Dr. Harlan, increased decidedly after the tents were put up on the tiny key, and served to make their slumbers all the more profound. When the sun looked up over the sea at the low-lying reefs they were yet asleep, and not until his rays had dissipated the dampness of the dew did either awake.

It was old Chloe who first opened her eyes, and she performed her toilet in the salt water without noticing that any of their belongings were missing. Her only thought was to begin the duties of the day under the mild exhilaration of

her favorite beverage, and while building a small fire near the canvas dwellings, Jake made his appearance, yawning until it seemed as if his jaws would be dislocated.

"We had a pretty long watch below, eh, aunty? I feel as if I could go back an' take another twelve-hour snooze, but we'll have all the sleep we want before it's time to make Key West agin. Halloo! What's---"

He made no effort to finish the question, but stood staring out over the sea as if he saw some terrible sight, and his loud exclamation caused Ben to come from the tent very quickly.

"What's the matter?" he asked nervously, alarmed by the expression on the man's face.

"The boat!" Jake cried, pointing to the shore where Ben had last seen the sloop. "I forgot to give her more cable before I turned in, an' she has gone adrift!"

Ben gave one quick glance around, and as nothing met his eager gaze but the placid sea and shimmering green of the foliage, he ran at full speed toward the indentation of the beach which had served as harbor.

Here he gained an unobstructed view of the waters, on which, far away to the eastward, could be seen a clump of green as if some of the mangroves had left the reef on an independent cruise.

"There she is!" he cried as Jake and Chloe joined him, the latter puffing and blowing like a miniature steam-engine. "I believe I can swim that far, for the sea is as calm as a pond."

"Don't go to tryin' anything so wild as that," and Jake seized the boy by the shoulder roughly to prevent him from taking off his clothes. "There are plenty of sharks 'round here, an' even if they could be steered clear of, you'd never reach her."

"But we can't let her drift away," Ben cried, struggling to release himself from the cook's detaining grasp. "If she's lost how can we get to Key West? Nobody knows where we are, an' it might be two or three months before Captain Irwin could find us among all these reefs."

"That's true, lad, but however bad we're fixed now, I ain't goin' to let you make it worse by doin' what'll surely end in death. The sloop is driftin' further away every minute, an' it would take a ten-mile swim to catch her."

"We can't stand here an' see her go without doin' anything to prevent it."

"We've got to, lad. It's my fault that she went adrift, an' I'd take pretty big chances for the sake of bringing her back, but babies couldn't be any more

helpless than we are now. I oughter be thumped black an' blue, an' then pickled for bein' sich a fool. The idea of my goin' to sleep when I knew the cable was hove so short that any catspaw of wind would send her adrift!"

It seemed as if Jake's condemnation of himself caused Ben to fully realize the situation, and he no longer made any attempt to swim after the slowly receding craft. When his excitement subsided a little he understood how futile would be such an effort, and said quietly as he removed the cook's hand from his shoulder:

"You needn't be afraid of my tryin' to swim, for it would be foolish. Don't blame yourself for what can't be helped, an' let's go back to the tent. Perhaps we can rig up some plan for gettin' away from here when we want to go."

By this time Gertie had joined the party; but, much to Ben's surprise, she did not appear to consider the loss of the boat such a great misfortune. Her one fear was that she might be again in Dr. Harlan's power, and any disaster would have seemed small by comparison.

"Captain Irwin will find us," she said confidently. "We have got a comfortable place in which to live, food enough for some time, and it's wicked to feel so badly about what can't be helped."

"Well," Jake said with a long-drawn breath of astonishment, "if a child like you can take things so easy, I reckon an old shell-back like me ain't got any call to kick up a row. We'll get breakfast, an' then kinder take account of stock, for we've got to be mighty careful of the provisions an' water till we know how to get more."

Then Ben remembered how small the cask was which they had buried in the sand, and he knew the time must speedily come when there would be no water to drink; but nothing could be gained by reminding his companions of this unpleasant fact, therefore he followed the others back to the tents in silence.

An Opportune Arrival

Each member of the party, with the exception of Chloe, was doing his or her best to appear cheerful during the time they were preparing and eating breakfast, and the result naturally was that the enforced gayety gave no signs of mirth. It is barely possible Gertie did not have any dismal forebodings regarding the future, but the others realized fully the sufferings they might be called upon to bear, though all were careful to avoid any word which would lead the conversation into this very unpleasant channel.

Chloe discussed with Jake the question of how an oven, which would serve every purpose of a stove, could be built, and Ben carried on a conversation with Gertie regarding the cat, until the meal was finished, when the former cook of the Sea Queen beckoned for Ben to follow him as he said carelessly:

“We’ll look around the island a bit, an’ in the course of an hour or so come back here to build the oven for aunty. There ain’t any need of hurryin’ very much for we’ve got more time than we know what to do with.”

Ben understood that this proposition to explore the key was only made in order to give them an opportunity of discussing the situation, and he walked on in silence until they were at the extreme end of the reef, when he asked:



"How long will our provisions last, Jake?"

"A good while longer than the water, I reckon," was the reply in a tone of despair. "We could manage to catch some fish, with now an' then a turtle to help out on; but we've got to keep drinkin' all the time, an' where's the water comin' from? Our five gallons may see us through a couple of days, countin' what we've used already, an' then what'll we do?"

"It may rain before we'll have to answer the question," Ben suggested; but at the same time he knew that such good fortune was hardly within the range of possibilities.

"You might jest as well say perhaps the yacht will drift back here, for neither of them chances is likely to turn up," and Jake spoke very sharply, as if he believed his companion was treating a serious problem with too much levity.

"I only said perhaps it might rain. Of course we wouldn't expect to find water by digging into a coral reef, an' when what's in the breaker gives out we'll go thirsty unless some vessel comes this way."

"That's the very thing," Jake said quickly as if this was the point to which he had been trying to bring the conversation. "Captain Irwin won't hunt for us until after two weeks at the very least, 'cause if we don't show up in Key West

he'll think we're all right, an' the only hope we've got is that a craft of some kind will heave in sight."

"Would you go back to Key West an' run the chance of Dr. Harlan's seein' Gertie?"

"It'll be better to do that than die from thirst," was the quick reply; "but we needn't take them risks. One of us might go there, see the captain, an' then come back for the others, for of course a little water could be got from whatever craft we hailed to keep them as was left behind from suffering."

"You know I'm ready to agree to anything which promises to get us out of the trouble," Ben said when Jake paused as if for an answer; "but we must wait till a vessel comes along."

"That's a fact, and between whiles it's our business to rig up somethin' that'll answer for a signal of distress, after which we'll take turns at standin' watch. We want a piece of white cloth, an' I reckon it won't do any harm to tear a strip from one of the tents."

"Perhaps Chloe has got some; she bought a lot of things for Gertie jest before we come away."

"Go an' see, while I'm lookin' for somethin' that'll serve as a flag-staff."

Ben went toward the tents, which were completely hidden from the view of those on the westerly end of the key by the trees, and on arriving there found Gertie and Chloe busily engaged in the household duties as if nothing had occurred to cause them any distress of mind. The old woman was evidently making ready the new wardrobe she had purchased for the child, for a quantity of material, as well as a number of outside garments, lay on the sand just inside the tent.

"That's the very thing I want, aunty," Ben said as he pointed to a roll of cotton cloth. "Will you give me two or three yards?"

"Spects I'll hab ter, honey; but don' go cuttin' up any monkey shines wid it, kase I paid ten cents for ebery yard."

Ben did not explain for what purpose he intended to use the cloth; but, cutting off as much as he believed would be necessary for a signal, hurried away before any questions could be asked.

Jake's portion of the work was the most difficult, owing to the lack of material, and he had done hardly more than settle upon a definite plan when Ben returned.

"I'm goin' to hunt among the mangroves for the longest straight branch that can be found. You get a big pile of wood together while I'm gone, an' then

our signal of distress will be finished. If we're lucky enough to sight a vessel anywhere near the key we ought to be able to attract attention by sending up a lot of smoke an' wavin' a white flag at the same time."

It was nearly noon before these preparations were completed. The cotton cloth hung from a pole about ten feet long, and near by was a stack of wood as high as Ben's head, with a lot of shavings at the base by which a quick fire could be kindled.

"If I hadn't been sich a fool we wouldn't have to do anything like this," Jake said in a petulant tone as the two went toward the tents for dinner. "We could be takin' our ease with a trim little craft anchored close by, an' this trip wouldn't seem anything more'n a bit of pleasurin'. Now we've lost the boat, which cost an hundred dollars, an' still it'll be nothin' but a big piece of luck if we get away without knowin' what it means to be mighty thirsty."

"Is there any chance that vessels will come this way? The water is so shoal that a very big one couldn't get within five miles."

"The sponge-fishers use light-draught craft, an' some of 'em must cruise near about. If we could hail one it oughter be an easy matter to buy some water, an' a passage for you or I to Key West. I reckon you brought the money?"

"It's all in the tent except what I gave you an' Aunt Chloe," Ben replied, and then he relapsed into silence as he wondered how much of his father's little hoard would be left when he finally succeeded in reaching New York.

Dinner was ready when the two arrived at the canvas dwelling, and despite Gertie's attempts to cheer her companions, but little merriment was indulged in during the meal. Even Chloe had begun to feel depressed, for while making tea she discovered how limited was the supply of water, and it seemed almost a relief to Ben when Jake said, as he concluded a not very hearty meal:

"If I have been the dumbest kind of a fool in some things, I managed to buy a couple of fish-lines an' hooks, an' we'll see what can be done this afternoon toward splicin' out the provisions. I reckon we can catch some red snappers over on the west side where we've been workin'."

After cutting a slice of raw pork for bait, he set out with Ben, saying when they were at such a distance from the tents that his words could not be overheard:

"We've got to stand watch, lad, an' we might as well have a little business on hand to make the time pass quicker."

But fishing was work rather than amusement while they were so troubled regarding the future, and the hours dragged along quite as wearily as if nothing had been done save gaze over the mirror-like water in the vain hope of seeing a sail. When the sun sunk behind the reefs not so much as a sleeping turtle had been seen, but the time was not absolutely wasted, for five small red snappers were shown as the result of seven hours' labor.

"Pears to me like dey was too small to cook," old Chloe said doubtfully, as Ben laid the fish in front of her with the request that they be served up for supper. "I'se powerful fond ob snappers, but dem ain't much more'n bones."

"They must weigh about a pound apiece, an' I reckon they'll turn out great for pan-fish, but if you don't want to fry 'em on account of the size, why I'll have to try my hand at it."

As he spoke Jake begun to make ready for the work, and Chloe, jealous lest her privileges as cook should be encroached upon, cried angrily:

"G'ware frum dere. Day'll be spiled suah ef you meddles wid 'em. I'se gwine ter git right ter work, an' when I'se frou you kin mess wid de bones ef you'se achin' ter show how sailors hab to live. It makes my ole head snap ter see men folks foolin' roun' 'splainin' what great cooks dey is."

"All right, aunty, have it your own way an' you'll live the longer. I wouldn't a' said a word only I thought you didn't want to bother with 'em. Ben an' me have got plenty to do gatherin' fire-wood."

Old Chloe made no reply, but begun bustling around as if all her strength and energies were necessary in the proper preparation of the fish, and finding that she could be of no assistance in preparing the evening meal, Gertie joined the others in the work of collecting fuel.

The party were thus busily engaged, and at least two had begun to build hopes of sighting some passing craft next day, when all were absolutely dazed with fear by hearing a cry from the water, apparently not more than an hundred yards away:

"Halloo! on the key!"

It was nearly a minute before Jake gathered his scattered senses sufficiently to reply, and then he shouted at the full strength of his lungs:

"Boat ahoy! ahoy!"

"Well, we can hear without so much noise," was the reply in an ordinary tone of voice. "What are you doing on shore?"

Again was Jake dilatory about answering, for that question caused both him and Ben to fear that the strangers might have been sent by Dr. Harlan--perhaps the quack himself was in the boat.

"We're out here for a little sport," Ben replied after waiting so long that it seemed certain suspicious had been aroused if the strangers were in search of them. "Are you coming ashore?"

"Yes, we may as well stretch our legs a bit, I suppose," the voice replied, and the rattle of cordage told that a sail was being lowered. "Stand by to take our line, will you?"

"All right," Ben shouted, and then he whispered to Gertie: "Run back to the tents, hide the clothes so these men won't know there are any women about, then take the kitten and go way over on the other side of the key. They may be spies your step-father has sent, an' you must keep out of sight."

The mention of the man whom she feared so much was sufficient to make Gertie move very quickly, and Ben had hardly ceased speaking before she was running toward the fire at full speed.

Jake went at once to the very edge of the water, understanding now what a mistake he had possibly made in not answering the question the instant it was asked, and when Ben joined him was pulling in on a light heaving-line.

Slowly the strange craft was hauled out of the gloom until it could be seen that she was a single-masted boat about the same size of the one which had gone adrift, and Jake asked of the man who stood in the bow:

"Which way have you come from, stranger?"

"We've been in Barnes' Sound for the last two or three weeks."

"Didn't see anything of a stray boat, did you?"

"No; have you lost one?"

"Yes; ours went adrift last night, an' we're shut up on this key without any too much provisions or water. Where are you bound?"

"To Key West. If you are thirsty we can spare you something to drink, for I suppose we must be pretty near the town?"

"It ain't more'n ten miles south of here."

The strangers had come ashore by this time, and, to his great relief, Ben saw that they were two young men evidently bent on sport rather than such business as Dr. Harlan's.

A short conversation showed them to be from the North on a fishing and hunting excursion, and both Ben and Jake felt that fortune or chance, whichever it might be, had been very kind in sending them at such a time.

Having come from the sound, while the anxious ones were keeping watch on the west side of the key, it was impossible to sight her before dark, which was sufficient explanation of what at first seemed like a mysterious arrival, and with not a fear now that the strangers might be hunting for Gertie, the ex-cook lost no time in making arrangements for a passage to Key West.

“What’ll you take to let one of us go on with you?” he cried. “We’ve got to buy another boat, an’ don’t want to break up here yet awhile.”

“You’re welcome to a passage if you’ll do your share of the work,” one of the men replied heartily. “Take a breaker of water ashore now, and that portion of the trouble will be ended.”

As may be supposed, Jake and Ben worked with a will at this task, and when the contents of the cask had been emptied into the one which was buried, the strangers approached the camp-fire.

“Take hold an’ have supper with us,” Jake said as he removed the decidedly overdone fish from the coals, and in a few moments all four were busily engaged, the new-comers evidently having no suspicion that there was any one else on the key.

“When are you going to start?” Jake asked, after his guests had eaten a hearty meal, despite the diminutive size of the fish.

“I suppose we may as well take advantage of the night wind, for it’s coming in pretty fresh just now, and we ought to be there before bed-time. Which of you will go? We can carry both as well as not.”

“I’ll stay here,” Ben said decidedly. “Jake can bring the boat back better than I, so he’s the one to do the business.”

“Come on, then,” one of the strangers said as he led the way toward the boat, and Jake lingered behind only long enough for Ben to bring some money from the tent.

Waiting And Watching

When they were in the tent, and while Ben was taking the gold from its hiding-place, it occurred to Jake that perhaps he was selfish in going to Key West without first learning whether his companion would like to make the trip, and he said:

“I reckon you could do the business as well as I can, lad, an’ perhaps better. Now, s’posen you go; I’ll stay here and take care of things, an’ won’t be sorry at gettin’ out of the job.”

“You’re the one who must do the work, for I couldn’t manage anything larger than a row-boat, an’ besides, I’d never be able to find this key again.”

“I’m willin’, of course, but thought perhaps you wanted the job. You’ve got provisions an’ water enough to last three days, with what fish can be caught, so none of the crowd will suffer if I don’t hurry right back.”

“Take plenty of time to get all that’s needed, an’ be sure to have a good talk with the lawyer, if it ain’t safe to see the captain himself. We shall get along in fine style, even if you’re away four days, now that we’re no longer worryin’ about water.”

“I won’t say good-by to Gertie, for I don’t want to run the risk of her bein’ seen by those strangers. Watch out for me after forty-eight hours, for that will give me plenty of time in case we reach Key West to-morrow mornin’.”

Then Jake hurried away, and when Ben reached the shore, after having replaced his gold in its hiding-place, the boat was being poled out into deeper water before the sails were set.

“Enjoy yourself fishin’,” the ex-cook shouted as the little craft was swallowed up in the gloom, and Ben barely had time to reply before the sound of halliards running through the blocks was heard.

“I’ll be all right, so take your time to attend to business.”

Then the hum of conversation died away in the distance as the yacht forged ahead under the influence of the strong night wind, and when he could hear nothing more Ben started toward the south side of the key to tell Gertie and Chloe that they might safely return to the camp.

He found the child in the greatest distress, for, not having been summoned as soon as it was possible to learn the stranger’s errand, she felt sure they had

come in search of her; but after Ben had explained all that had happened, she soon recovered her usual good spirits, and it was a very jolly party which gathered around the fire, bent on preparing once again the interrupted supper.

"You needn't be saving of either the provisions or the water, mammy," Ben said as he fed the flames with a huge bundle of wood. "Jake will be back before we can use half the stuff we've got, an' when he does come you may be certain the second boat won't get away."

Old Chloe had been as anxious as either Ben or Jake regarding the supplies; but now that all necessity for economy was removed she set about preparing a most elaborate meal, and a merry, care-forgetting party was it which partook of the viands on that tiny key.

The meal was prolonged until a very late hour in the evening, and when the castaways sought shelter in the tents it was with the happy belief that before the sun had set twice more they would have the means of leaving the reef whenever it should be their pleasure so to do.

"We'se got no call to fuss any mo'," old Chloe said as she and Gertie went into their tent, "an' de Lawd is so good to us dat we'll get 'roun' dat medicine doctor yet. We ain't out here in de wilderness like de children of Israel for nothin', an' whenebber we do get to a home we'll fin' it oberflowin' wid milk an' honey, same's dey did."

Just at that moment the surf beat against the sandy shore unusually loud, and Chloe remembered that they had no other defender than Ben, which caused her to grow very nervous.

"Wha' dat noise?" she asked in a whisper, and after waiting a few seconds without receiving any reply from Gertie, she cried: "Don' go tryin' fur ter skeer yer ole mammy, Ben, jes' kase she's pretty nigh alone on dis h'yar little bunch ob sand."

"I ain't doin' anything," Ben said sleepily. "There's nothin' to be afraid of if Jake is away, for we're sure that nobody but us is on the key, an' it isn't likely we'll have any more visitors before morning at the soonest."

Now that Chloe had begun to be timid it was not possible to quiet her rising fears. During the next two hours she called to Ben at least twenty times, asking the cause of certain imaginary noises, and insisting that he get up and search over the key to learn whether or no maliciously disposed persons had landed for the purpose of working some injury to the party.

It was not until slumber closed her eyelids that either of the children could go to sleep; but when the occupants of the camp did sink into a state of repose, they remained unconscious of all fancied danger until a late hour next morning, when Ben was awakened by the sunlight streaming through the open flap of the tent across his face.

After calling the others, his first care was to look out over the placid waters, for it was impossible to check the fear that Dr. Harlan might send or come himself in search of Gertie; but nothing could be seen. If the cask had not been filled this absence of a sail would have caused him great disappointment, whereas he now felt a most intense satisfaction.

"I don't want to see the least little bit of a boat till Jake gets back," he said to himself as he built the fire, "for then we sha'n't be afraid that any one is comin' for her."

That this wish was to be gratified during one day at least seemed positive, for nothing passed within view of the tiny key as the hours wore on. Chloe fairly outdid herself in the preparation of breakfast, and when that meal had been eaten the castaways, with the cat following very close to Gertie, walked around their place of refuge, or out over the water on the mangrove roots to watch the beautifully colored fish, which darted to and fro among the coral branches, making their gorgeous hues seem more vivid by contrast.

Those who have never witnessed such a sight can hardly conceive what brilliant colors may be found in the sea. That ardent sportsman, Dr. Henshall, says:

"The fishes about the keys are very handsome, both in form and coloration; silvery, rosy, scarlet, brown and golden bodies, with sky-blue, bright yellow, rosy, or black stripes and bands, or spotted, stellated and mottled with all the hues of the rainbow, and with jeweled eyes of scarlet, blue, yellow or black; fins of all colors and shapes, and lips of scarlet, red, blue or silver."

Ben did not attempt to catch any of these gaudy neighbors. His experience of the previous day had shown him that they were not easily coaxed from their natural element with no more alluring bait than salt pork, and there was no longer the incentive of adding to the contents of the larder, for they had sufficient food on hand to supply every want till Jake returned, unless, indeed, he should be delayed by some accident.

It was a happy day for all. Even old Chloe, who complained at every opportunity that by wandering over the sand she was sure to "git de rheumatiz

powerful bad,” appeared to thoroughly enjoy herself, and when they laid down to sleep there was not so much as the shadow of a fear in the mind of either member of the party.

“We may expect to see Jake by to-morrow night if there is any wind,” Ben said just before falling asleep, and when he next realized anything some one was shaking him roughly by the shoulder and shouting:

“Turn out here, my hearty, unless you’re countin’ on stayin’ below all day. If the doctor was anywhere round he could steal the whole crowd before one of you could so much as open an eye.”

It was the ex-cook, as Ben saw after he leaped to his feet in alarm, and an instant later all three were asking a perfect flood of questions at the same time.

“The easiest way will be for me to spin a reg’lar yarn, ’cause it would take too much time to answer all you want to know in sections. You start the fire while my tongue keeps runnin’, Ben, for I’m hungry enough to eat three men’s rations. I left Key West jest before sunrise this mornin’, an’ haven’t had a bite since last night.”

Ben did as he was bidden. Chloe and Gertie made very hasty toilets, and then came out into the open air where they could see the cook while he told his story.

“We got into Key West about three hours after we left here, night before last,” Jake said as he threw himself in a comfortable position on the sand, and spoke slowly as if thoroughly enjoying his importance. “I didn’t try to find that lawyer Captain Irwin told of till the next mornin’, an’ then I’d been waitin’ at his office nigh onto two hours. He wasn’t a bit surprised because I was there, but talked just as cool an’ quiet like as if he’d met me every day.”

“Never mind that part of it,” Ben interrupted with a gesture of impatience. “Tell us what he said about Gertie.”

“Now don’t hurry me, an’ you’ll git the yarn all the quicker,” Jake replied with considerable dignity. “I told him I wanted every bit of news, an’ he said as how the quack doctor brought a suit against the captain jest as he threatened to do. If Gertie had been there he might a’ got hold of her at the start, but it wasn’t hard to show what he made her do when the Sea Queen stopped at Key West, an’ now the lawyer says that it ain’t at all likely the judge would appoint any one except the captain to take charge of her.”

“Isn’t the case settled yet?” Gertie asked in surprise. “It seems as if there had been time enough to say I’d rather die than go away with that man.”

"It won't be fixed for good till you go back and tell your story in court, an'----"

"Then he would be sure to catch me," Gertie cried as a look of fear came over her face. "I had rather stay right here 'till the captain gets ready to go to New York."

"You can't do that," and Jake spoke very decidedly now. "The lawyer says we must get there on Monday or Tuesday about eleven o'clock in the forenoon, an' he'll have a man waitin' at the dock for us so's there won't be any chance of the doctor's doin' mischief. You've got to tell your story before the thing can be wound up, an' there's no gettin' out of it. To-morrow is Sunday, an' we'll stay here quiet an' snug till the next mornin'."

"Did you see the captain?" Ben asked.

"No; an' the lawyer advised me to keep away from him, 'cause what he don't know he can't be made to tell. I run plump into the quack yesterday afternoon, an' he wanted to stop an' have a talk, but I kept straight on about my business."

"Do you suppose there was any chance he followed to see which way you came?" and Gertie's face began to grow pale with apprehension as she thought such a contingency possible.

"I don't reckon he did. He was nosin' 'round the docks last night, but I didn't get under-weigh, although everything was ready. That's why I started so early this mornin', an' if he saw my boat when she left the harbor, he must a set up all night."

This reminded Ben of the new craft, and while Chloe was cooking breakfast he went with Gertie and Jake to inspect her.

She was much larger than the one which had gone adrift, and was schooner-rigged, with a beam so broad it seemed as if she could not draw more than ten inches.

"I didn't buy her," Jake said quickly, fancying Ben looked anxious because of the possible cost. "She was layin' down at that New York firm's dock--they've been usin' her for a sponger--an' by gettin' the lawyer to guarantee that she'd be brought back safe and sound, I hired her for three dollars a day. She's a pretty fair sailer, has a cabin big enough to hold all hands, an' acts like a good sea-boat. I thought perhaps we might start out this afternoon an' hunt for our sloop."

Before Ben could make any objections to this plan Gertie cried, as she pointed toward the south:

"See! there's a boat coming this way from the direction of Key West! Are you sure, Jake, that no one saw when you left?"

"I allowed I'd given 'em all the slip," the ex-cook muttered half to himself as, shading his eyes with his hands, he gazed out over the water at a small craft of not more than three or four tons burden, which was coming toward the key at a spanking rate.

"They're headin' straight for us," Ben said nervously. "Did you notice a boat near here when you landed?"

"I didn't look, an' that's a fact. It was too dark to make out if any craft left the harbor behind me, and an hour afterward I was among that nest of keys where one would have been hidden even if it was only two or three miles astern. Say, Ben, can you tell the color of her hull?"

"I should say it was white with a red ribbon," the boy replied, after a close scrutiny of the approaching stranger, and as he spoke Jake brought his hand down on his thigh with a resounding slap.

"It's the very craft that anchored pretty close alongside of me about eleven o'clock last night. I'll bet a doughnut agin' a big apple that the quack was aboard at the time, an' when I got under-weigh they up anchor an' follered. Oh, what a fool I can make of myself without much tryin'!"

"If he is coming you and Ben can't prevent him from taking me away," Gertie said with quivering lips, and a look of agony shone in the big, brown eyes which aroused Ben very suddenly from his stupor of surprise.

"We needn't stay here!" he cried. "They can't make the key for half an hour, and there's nothin' to stop us from leavin' at once. If our boat doesn't sail any faster than that craft, we can at least reach Key West in time to put you under the lawyer's care."

"You're right, lad, you're right, and there isn't a minute to spare," Jake shouted as he ran at full speed toward the tents. "Let's get this stuff on board an' be off."

"Don't wait for anything," Ben cried. "We had better lose all we've got than have him catch Gertie."

"But we must take a portion, lad, for there's no knowin' how long we'll be cruisin' around, an' we may need all the provisions an' water."

Recognizing the truth of this remark, Ben followed Jake's example without delay, and while three of the party were exerting themselves to the utmost, the strange craft was steadily drawing nearer the key.

The Castaways — Chapter XXIII

A Stern Chase

To Ben it seemed as if he had never been so awkward as now, when every moment was precious. In trying to gather up half a dozen articles at the same time, he was of necessity obliged to drop several, and the result proved to him the truth of the old adage that “the more haste the less speed.”

Gertie was doing more effective work than any other member of the party. Fear, instead of rendering her nervous, made her the more methodical, and she had been from the tents to the boat twice with an armful of goods before Ben succeeded in carrying his first load.

Old Chloe was absolutely helpless. When Jake shouted the startling information that Dr. Harlan was fast approaching the key, she sank upon the sand a helpless, quivering mass of black flesh, which was by no means silent. She alternately called the names of her companions, or uttered the most absurd threats in case the quack should dare to land, and the outcry only served to make the others more nervous.

“Don’t stop to take down the tents, lad,” Jake cried as Ben began unloosening the ropes. “We can afford to lose ’em, an’ there won’t be room in the boats for everything. Make sure of your money, an’ when I’ve got this water-breaker aboard we’ll start.”

All the stores, as well as the greater portion of the camp equipage, had been conveyed to the little craft by this time, and Gertie was trying to catch the kitten, who appeared to think her young mistress was bent on a frolic, when Jake stowed the cask in the cuddy.

“Come, aunty, we’re off now,” Ben said as he tried to shake the old woman into something approaching activity. “Get down to the boat as quick as you can.”

“Dey’ll drownd all hands ef dey ketch us on dat ’ar little aig-shell,” she moaned, without making any effort to rise, and Ben looked from her to the craft in the distance, which was coming down upon the key so rapidly.

“If we get away before they are in a position to stop us we shall be all right,” he cried imploringly. “Please hurry, aunty.”

“We’ll have to drag her along,” Jake said as he came running from the shore at full speed. “Go on board at once, even if you have to leave the kitten

behind," he shouted to Gertie, and then seizing Chloe by the arm, began to pull her toward the boat with no more ceremony than if she had been a not very valuable article of merchandise.

Ben understood that heroic measures only would avail them at such a time, and he assisted the ex-cook to the best of his ability, the old woman mingling her groans with appeals for the others to let her "die in peace."

Meanwhile Gertie had succeeded in convincing the cat that this was no time for a romp, and she allowed herself to be caught just as Chloe's unceremonious removal was begun. Thus the girl could aid her companions in their difficult task, and the old woman was dragged to the water's edge almost as quickly as if she had gone of her own free will.

"Throw her right on board!" Jake shouted as he struggled to raise the burden to a standing posture, and she cried frantically:

"Lef me be! Please lef me 'lone, Massa Jake, kase I'se willin' to step out quick."

"You two hold the boat so it can't swing around, and I'll help her over the side," Gertie said as she put the kitten in the cock-pit, and three minutes later Chloe was cowering in the cuddy wiping the sand and perspiration from her face.

"Run up the jib and mainsail while I shove off!" Jake shouted, and in a wonderfully short space of time the little craft was so far from the shore that the influence of a strong breeze could be felt.

It was, indeed, time for the fugitives to start. The new-comer, which had caused such a sudden change of base, was hardly more than half a mile away, coming toward the key with a good-sized "bone in her teeth," and in the bow could be distinctly seen the form of Dr. Harlan, who turned now and then to his crew as if urging them to greater speed.

"You can yell yourself hoarse, old whiskers, without changin' matters," Jake said, between his teeth, as he exerted all his strength on the oar, which he was using as a pole. "That boat is doin' the best she can now, an' swearin' won't do a bit of good."

Ben did not trouble himself about hoisting the canvas smooth and trim; it was sufficient for him that the sails were up far enough to draw, and when this was done he went aft to assist Jake.

Thanks to their activity the little schooner was running well before the wind in two or three minutes from the time old Chloe stepped aboard, and

then it was possible to devote some attention to trimming her in the best condition for sailing.

Jake sat at the helm while Ben swung down on the halliards, carried the sheets free and clear, and stowed neatly away the goods so hastily thrown aboard until the weight was evenly divided, when he had an opportunity of watching their pursuers.

Owing to the delay of getting under way the doctor's boat was now almost within hailing distance, and her crew could be plainly distinguished. There were three men on board in addition to the quack, and it was only reasonable to suppose they were much better acquainted with the channel than Jake.

"They're sailin' her for all she's worth," the ex-cook said, glancing back for an instant, and then turning again to watch his own boat that no advantage might be lost. "I reckon he's promised to pay 'em well if we're caught, an' they'll do their best."

"Do you think she can sail faster than our craft?" Ben asked nervously.

"That's hard to tell yet awhile; but we shall find out soon enough. What I'm afraid of is that we'll plump on to some shoal, for they're thicker 'round here than June flies in a molasses jug, an' I'm goin' to work into clearer water till we can bear straight for Cape Sable."

"Do you want to land there?"

"Not a bit of it; but we can then work up shore, pervidin' we hold our own, an' perhaps get a chance to double back on 'em. Key West is the place we must fetch before landin', an' to make things anyways even we oughter be there at least an hour ahead of that quack."

"I'm afraid it can't be done," Ben replied in a low whisper lest the words should be overheard by those in the cuddy. "They'll manage to hold their own if nothin' more."

"Then we'll give 'em a mighty lively sail of it. We've most likely got more provisions aboard than they have, an' unless we carry away the spars there's nothin' to prevent our cruisin' around for a week. Take the tiller while I fill my pipe, an' then we can run comfortable like."

Both pursuer and pursued were well to the north and westward of the keys by this time, each moment getting into clearer water, where there was every opportunity for a long race. So far as could be told the sailing qualities of the two boats were about equal, and if the fugitives should get into the open gulf the doctor might find it necessary to put into some port for provisions and water.

On finding that they were not captured immediately, old Chloe recovered somewhat from the frenzy of fear which had rendered her so incapable of everything save the power of making a noise, and with Gertie's aid set about putting the cabin to rights.

"I'se reckonin' Massa Jake's gwine ter run away frum dat low-down, cheap doctor, an' we'se boun' ter fix up here honey, so's we kin toddle roun' widout splashin' all ober dis h'yar lot ob stuff."

Anything was preferable to remaining idle, speculating as to whether Dr. Harlan would overtake them, and Gertie worked industriously until the interior of the cuddy presented quite a habitable appearance. Then old Chloe began to prepare the breakfast, which had been put on board in a half-cooked condition, and at the end of two hours she dished out a palatable portion for each one, with plenty of cold tea to wash it down.

"There's no reason why you two shouldn't come out into the cockpit," Jake said when Gertie pushed the food from the cabin as she tried to keep herself hidden from view. "Your step-father knows you are here, for he was near enough to see all hands of us when we started, an' it'll be more comfortable to move around."

It seemed to Gertie much as if she was increasing the chances of capture by showing herself, but the desire to be in the open air was so great that after a little hesitation she acted upon the ex-cook's advice, and all hands breakfasted in the cockpit after a very jolly fashion, even though an enemy was in close pursuit.

Upon gaining the open water Jake's greatest fear was that the wind would die away until the doctor could overtake them by using oars, in which work he and Ben would have been decidedly at a disadvantage, but happily this did not occur. That which had been only a summer breeze at sunrise continued to grow stronger at noon, when there was quite as much as either craft could stand up under; and dashing the tiny waves into clouds of spray on either bow the two sped on until the low, palmetto-covered shores of Cape Sable drew close on the starboard hand.



So far the race had resulted in favor of the fugitives. At the start they had not been more than a quarter of a mile in advance, while now Dr. Harlan's boat was so far astern that it was no longer possible to distinguish the features of her occupants.

"Before the wind we've got the best of 'em," Jake said with a smile of satisfaction, "an' now we'll see what can be done runnin' free."

"Why not keep on this way a while longer?" Ben asked, unwilling to give an advantage for an uncertainty.

"Because they'll soon have us so near the land that we can't crawl off, an' if we're obliged to go ashore the jig is up, for they could easily catch us."

After this statement of the case no further protest was made, and the little craft was brought around until the wind came over the port quarter, the pursuing boat adopting the same tactics at once, which still kept her to seaward.

"They're figgerin' to stop us from sneakin' out side," Jake said as he watched the maneuvers of the enemy, "an' perhaps they'll succeed; but I doubt it."

On this point of sailing neither boat had the advantage, and during the remainder of the afternoon the relative positions remained unchanged, one

skirting the shore at a distance of from six to seven miles, while the other hung to her quarter doggedly.

The anxiety of the pursued prevented them from feeling that exhilaration which is produced by rapid sailing, otherwise the day would have been most enjoyable. Chloe served dinner and supper in the cockpit, and although the food was cold, all did it full justice. At nightfall Jake begun to edge further away from the shore, increasing the distance slowly but surely, until when the mantle of night shut down over the leaping waters he had an offing of at least ten miles. The wind had a sensible weight of dampness in it as the darkness increased, and when the gloom hid from view all traces of the pursuers, Jake said, as he pulled his coat more closely around him:

“Now, Gertie, you, Chloe an’ the cat had better turn in. Ben an’ I won’t be likely to have a watch below till after sunrise; but that’s no reason why the rest of the crowd should stay on deck. It’s gettin’ kinder dusty here an’ you’ll be wet through if you don’t crawl into the cuddy mighty lively.”

Nothing could be seen by remaining in the cockpit save the milky-white crests of the waves, and Chloe’s teeth were actually chattering with the cold, therefore Gertie, after giving one last look in the direction where the pursuers were supposed to be, went into the tiny cabin, Ben shutting the companion-way behind her.

“We’re likely to get more wind instead of less,” he said as he returned to Jake’s side, “an’ the question is how much sail can we carry?”

“She’ll stand this an’ considerable more. If it can’t be helped we’ll reef her down; but just now we want to show our best gait, for I’m goin’ to put about in a few minutes an’ point straight toward Key West.”

“If the doctor should do the same thing he’d get there ahead of us.”

“That’s a fact, an’ it’s a risk we’ve got to take. It stands us in hand to be ready for lively work when day breaks; but jest now we’ve got nothin’ to do but set still, for we sha’n’t be near the keys until a good while after sunrise.”

During the next half-hour the little craft continued on up the gulf, drawing the wind more and more astern until Jake said suddenly:

“Go for’red an’ ’tend to the jib-sheets. I ain’t sure that she’ll come about so very smartly, an’ we don’t want to waste any time.”

As a matter of fact the boat did not move as quickly as could have been desired by those who were so eager to gain distance and moments; but she was finally heading down the gulf with her bow pointed as nearly direct for Key West as was possible without a compass.

“We may run slap into ’em, or we may go past without bein’ seen,” Jake said, when Ben came aft once more, “so it stands us in hand to be ready to make things fly if we find ourselves in a scrape.”

Then both sat silently watching for the other boat while the trim, buoyant little craft dashed on swiftly over the waves as if fully conscious how much depended on her speed, and from out the blackness of night nothing was seen to cause alarm. If the pursuers kept straight on, then they had surely given them the slip, but if they put about in anticipation of such a maneuver it became a question of which was the best sailer.

The Castaways — Chapter XXIV

Jake'S Story

It was by no means a pleasant task sitting in the small cockpit surrounded by the darkness as the little craft dashed on over the foam-capped billows at imminent danger of being run down by a steamer or sailing-vessel. To display lights would lessen the risk of such a disaster very materially; but at the same time any signals would serve to show their pursuers the proper direction.

"We've got to take our chances of havin' some lumberin' old hooker stick her nose straight through us," Jake said in a matter of fact tone, when Ben spoke of the possible danger; "but I reckon we stand more sight to sneak along all right this way, than if we hung out a sign for that blessed doctor to follow."

Ben remained silent for a time listening to the rushing, shrieking wind and the sobbing of the waves, until it seemed as if the sound of a human voice was absolutely necessary. Then he said with an evident attempt at cheerfulness:

"It ain't very nice sailing in such a small craft, but it might be worse."

"That's jest where you're right, lad," and Jake spoke very emphatically. "I've knocked about in the night on what would make this boat seem like a big ocean steamer, to compare the two, an' it was that as first started me off to sea agin my own will."

"Tell me about it, Jake. Things won't be so lonesome, nor the night as long if you are talkin'."

"I reckon you're right, lad. Leastways it'll show you how snug we're fixed alongside of what I was one night."

Then, as the necessary preparation for story-telling, Jake gave up the tiller to Ben while he lighted his pipe, and when a coal of fire glowed bright and cheery in the bowl he resumed his duty as helmsman, as he began:

"Captain Irwin an' me were raised by the side of a river, an' I s'pose that's how he took so naturally to the water. In the summer we used to knock about in any kind of a tub we could borry, and winters, when the ice covered it for fifteen or twenty miles, the skatin' matches us boys had would make your eyes stick out.

"The night I'm tellin' about was in the spring, more years ago than I care to count. The weather held warm for three or four days; but nobody thought the ice had grown weaker, and a crowd of us boys started just after sun down to

kinder wind up the skatin' season. The wind had been blowin' hard all day; but that didn't hinder, 'cause by usin' our coats as sails we could scoot 'round mighty lively.

"There was about twenty in the crowd; but somehow Tommy Deacon an' me got separated from the rest, an' before we knowed much about our bearin's the bay was dead ahead with the waves churnin' up agin the ice pretty lively.

"I was for turnin' back, but Tommy allowed that we'd keep on five minutes longer, an' fearin' he might say I was afraid, fool-like, I agreed.

"We'll take a big circle round, an' then go back,' he said, an' the words wasn't more'n out of his mouth before it seemed as if the ice was lifted right up in the air while we pitched over on our noses.

"When I struck I went straight through into the water with the big cakes on top, an' by the time I knew what had happened I was scramblin' about among the ice tryin' to get my nose out for a breath of air.

"Somehow, more by good luck than wit, I got hold of a thick piece of ice, an' don't think I didn't kick mighty lively till I was on top of it. The sea was runnin' so high that I couldn't a' stood up even if the cake had been big enough, which it wasn't, an' there I staid on my hands an' knees doin' some mighty lively thinkin' about the folks at home; but poor Tommy never come into my mind till I heard a yell close alongside.

"It was him of course, an' after considerable hard work he crawled up, while the ice went sailin' out to sea, an' our clothes frozen so hard that they seemed more like boards than cloth. Cold? Well, you can't have any idea what the wind felt like. There wasn't any chance to move around, so we had to lay an' take it, seein' the lights on shore growin' dimmer an' dimmer till they faded out entirely, an' we was alone on the ocean with our craft of ice bein' chewed up mighty fast by the waves.

"For as much as an hour Tommy kept groanin' an' fussin'; but all at once he stopped, an' I knew the cruise was pretty nigh ended for him. I talked, an' scolded; but he never said a word, only kept rubbin' his fingers up an' down my arm till it made me feel creepy like. Then I managed to get over on my side so's I could chafe his face an' hands, an' while I was doin' it he kinder stiffened out an' laid like a log. I tell you, Ben, four weeks on a craft like this wouldn't be nothin' to one minute on that cake of ice with a dead chum alongside.

"It was the horror that kept me alive, I reckon, for it didn't seem as if the cold could have any effect just then. After that I don't know whether I lost my senses, or if a kind of sleepy feelin' came over me; but I didn't know much of

anything till I felt somebody pullin' an' haulin' to tear my clothes off the ice where they had been frozen on. It was a boat's crew from a ship which was hove-to about a mile off, an' we was well out to sea. They took me aboard, an' in a couple of days I was as chipper as ever; but whenever I'm out in the night like this every little portion of that cruise comes back to my mind."

"Did they carry you right home?" Ben asked, forgetting in the interest caused by Jake's story the possible danger which menaced Gertie.

"Not a bit they didn't. The ship--she was the Golden Age--had jest left port for the west coast of Africa, an' I had to go along whether I wanted to or not."

"It must have been two or three years before you saw your mother again."

"It was more than six when I turned up at home, lad, an' then she was dead."

"Why did you stay away so long?"

"Mostly 'cause I couldn't help myself, an' here's another yarn if you want to hear it. Take the tiller while I fill my pipe once more, an' I'll finish the spinnin'."

The wind did not sound so desolate, nor the swish of the water so mournful as Ben sat by the helm thinking of the ex-cook's story, and it seemed as if the boat had suddenly increased in size because of comparison with the cake of ice on which one boy had died and another drifted all night over tempest-tossed waters.

"This was the way of it," Jake said, as he resumed his seat at the helm, and Ben crouched behind the weather rail.

"We had a long run, for the Golden Age was an old tub, and got short of water--vessels in them days was mostly always short of something. So we had put in at a little island to fill the casks. I was one of the boat's crew, though I was a mite of a shaver, an' when we lowered away the captain shoved in a couple of muskets an' some ammunition. We hadn't seen anybody on shore, but in them days there wasn't as much known about foreign parts as now.

"I couldn't do a great deal toward fillin' the casks, an' when the crew found a spring not far from the beach, I loitered out through the woods, lookin' at the parrots an' other gay-colored birds, an' travelin' over what seemed to be an old path. It didn't appear to me that I was a cable's length from the boat, when with a sudden crash everything turned blank, an' by the time I knew anything more there was half a dozen natives around me grinnin' like so many monkeys.

“They must have carried me quite a ways, for we were near a lot of huts, an’ I was trussed up like a chicken ready for roastin’. A short bit off was a whole crowd of nigger-lookin’ men an’ wimmen, an’ I says to myself, ‘your last day has come, my lad.’ But it hadn’t, of course, or I wouldn’t be here a smokin’ of this ’ere pipe. Pretty soon I saw the crowd bringing up the muskets, oars and a lot of truck which I knew belonged to the crew, so there was no question but that the whole boatload had been killed, which made me think I was saved only to be made into a stew.

“I had an ugly cut on my head from which the blood flowed in a decent-sized stream, an’ the pain was so great that I didn’t care very much what was done providin’ I was put out of my misery; but bless you, they hadn’t any idea of such a thing. I laid there two days, the old women shovin’ food enough into my mouth from time to time to keep five men alive, an’ when the tribe got through celebratin’ the victory, I was as whole as ever.

“Then I learned why I hadn’t been killed. They wanted me as a slave, an’ for nigh onto three years I was everybody’s pack-horse. If anything was to be carried Jake had to do it; if fish were wanted Jake caught them, an’ between you an’ me, Ben, I did pretty much the whole work for that lazy lot of niggers until life was a burden.

“How I stood it nobody knows; but I did, an’ grew fat into the bargain. Then one day while I was fishin’ a whaler put in for water, an’ perhaps I didn’t take to my heels. Forty thousand niggers couldn’t have stopped me then, an’ to make a long story short, I got on board. Oh, how good Christian vittles tasted! Talk about the pleasure of hearin’ people talk! why that captain’s swearin’ sounded like music for the next week.

“It was hard lines on board the Betsy, however, as I s’pose it is anywhere in this world, but I was young an’ tough. I stuck by the ship ’cause I was afraid to run away agin, an’ in course of time we landed at New Bedford, which was the end of my cruise for four weeks. Then I saw Captain Irwin, all my friends were dead or had moved away, an’ I shipped with him. Since that day I’ve follered him like a shadder till we saw that blessed turtle, an’ the rest you know.”

“So goin’ to sea wasn’t your fault?” Ben said after a long pause.

“Indeed it wasn’t, or I might a’ been cured of it years ago; but what’s done an’ gone can’t be helped now, an’ I’m lookin’ ahead for the time when we’ll all be settled on shore in the house Captain Jack tells about.”

Then Jake relapsed into silence, and from that time until sunrise but little conversation was indulged in by the two who were making such strenuous efforts to escape from Dr. Harlan.

Once during the night Ben went into the cuddy for food, not because either he or Jake were hungry, but in order that by eating they might be more wakeful, and with the first grey light of dawn both were eagerly scanning the surrounding waters.

Far away to the southward could be seen the chain of keys; but when the golden rays of the sun dispelled the clouds of vapor not another sail was in view on that vast, beautiful expanse, and Jake cried joyously:

“So far we’re all right, lad, an’ now it’s our business to get up to that lawyer’s house in Key West before the quack knows where we are.”

The Castaways — Chapter XXV

A Place Of Safety

The glad sunlight, the leaping, dancing wind and the sparkling water on which was no sail to cause him fear, all served to make Ben feel happy, and he shouted through the companion-way:

“Come! Turn out! It’s mornin’, an’ the doctor’s craft must be pretty near Cedar Keys by this time. What are you goin’ to give us for breakfast, aunty?”

There was no reply for a moment; but the sound of some heavy body could be heard moving around in the cuddy, and then a fat, black face appeared above the hatch as its owner asked anxiously:

“Hab you done gone run ’way from dat low-down white man?”

“It looks like it, aunty,” Jake replied triumphantly. “There’s Key West dead ahead, an’ as his craft can’t sail so very much faster than this, I reckon we’ve given him the slip about as neat as Captain Irwin himself could a’ done it.”

“Is dat de truf, honey?” she asked, and when Ben nodded his head she exclaimed with a deep sigh of relief, resting her wrinkled chin on her hands as if the better to draw in long draughts of the invigorating morning air: “I ’clar to goodness, I ain’t had a good chance to breave till now. I’s nebber gwine ter poke fun onto Massa Jake any mo’ ef he’s done gone run ’way from dat wuffless trash.”

“It looks very much as if we had done it, aunty,” Ben said gleefully, “an’ in three or four hours we’ll be at Key West.”

“Wha’ you’s e gwine dere fur? Why don’ you sail back to our island? De doctor’s suah to come to Key West, an’ den what’ll be done?”

“If we get there an hour before he arrives we can put you an’ her under the lawyer’s care, where you’ll be safe till the matter is settled in court. It’ll be all right, ’cause he told Jake to have Gertie at his office not later than Tuesday.”

“But dis yere’s Sunday mornin’, an’ how’s e you gwine to fin’ him, when mos’ likely he’s in de meeting whar ebery Chris’ian oughter be?”

For a moment Ben was at a loss to know what reply to make. He had entirely forgotten that this new day was the Sabbath, and had counted on finding the attorney at his office.

“We’ll fix that all right,” Jake said with the air of one who is not to be deterred by such trifling difficulties. “Key West ain’t sich a large city but what

we can soon find out where a man lives, an' it'll be all the better for us if we have to go right to his house."

This reply evidently satisfied Chloe, for her head was immediately withdrawn from the hatchway, and a few moments later both she and Gertie came on deck for such a toilet as could be made with salt water, no soap, and a piece of cotton cloth as a towel.

The wind died away very perceptibly as the day advanced. By the time breakfast had been spread in the cockpit, it was nothing more than a fairly good sailing breeze; but this did not trouble Jake in the slightest, for if he was delayed the other craft would be also, and it was a matter of little moment whether they arrived in the forenoon or late at night.

"Unless the wind gives out entirely we'll be there about noon," he said cheerfully, as he ate the potted meat and dry hard-tack while holding the tiller, "an' that will suit us exactly."

In this he was more nearly correct than he himself had fancied. It was just twelve o'clock when the little craft glided lazily through the northwest channel into the harbor, where nothing could be seen of the boat the fugitives were so anxious to avoid, and preparations were made for a hurried landing.

"One of us will go ashore with Gertie, find a carriage if possible, and hunt for the lawyer's house, while the other stays here with Chloe until we know what's to be done," Jake said as the boat approached the dock.

"You'd better do that part instead of me, 'cause you've met him once, an' I might stand right alongside of him without knowin' who he was," Ben replied, not waiting to consult Gertie's wishes in the matter, and the ex-cook made ready to go on shore by smoothing down the hair over his forehead, and otherwise trying to make himself presentable according to his own ideas on the subject.

No time was wasted after the little craft was at the dock. The possibility that the quack doctor might arrive at any moment caused Jake to make all haste, and the instant one of the hawsers was made fast he leaped ashore with Gertie in his arms, running up the street as if fancying the enemy was in pursuit.

"He's all right so far," Ben said after watching until the ex-cook was out of sight, and then entering the cuddy where Chloe sat nursing the kitten as some slight consolation for the temporary loss of the child she loved so well. "There ain't much chance he'll meet the doctor, an' we can count on bein' back to the captain's house again pretty soon."

"I'se gwine whar my chile is," Chloe said stiffly, as if fearing Ben might propose that she be separated from Gertie during a certain length of time. "Dere's no reason why she shouldn't go on ahead; but I mus' foller her jes' as soon as dat wuffless Jake done gone foun' de lawyer man."

"Of course you will," Ben replied so heartily that any suspicions Chloe may have had as to the possibility of not seeing Gertie again at the earliest practicable moment were immediately dispelled. "He can't be away more than an hour, an' then you shall take the cat and start."

"Wha's you and Massa Jake gwine?" the old woman asked.

"We'll stay on board here till to-morrow, I guess, an' then hunt up the captain."

"Den I'se gwine ter fix yer something to eat."

"Don't do it, aunty," and Ben spoke quickly to prevent her from carrying the plan into immediate execution. "We've had all the cold stuff we want, an' when it's dinner-time we'll eat on shore where we can get a hot meal."

After that Chloe made no effort to prolong the conversation. That she was uneasy regarding Gertie's welfare could be plainly told from her face, and she remained on one of the lockers in anxious expectancy until the ex-cook's return, nearly an hour later.

"Well, I found my man!" he exclaimed triumphantly as he leaped on board the little boat with a jar that caused her to tremble from stem to stern. "We got a hack at the head of the dock, an' the driver knew all about the lawyer. He says she'll be safe with him, an' Chloe's to go up there as soon as she can git ready."

"An' dat's jes now, Massa Jake," the old woman said as she gave an extra twist to the bandana turban on her head. "I'se only been waitin' fur de word, an' don' wanter spend any time foolin'. I'll take de cat wid me, an' den de family'll be mostly togedder."

Jake was not eager to set out at once, and would have waited to gossip about what he saw and heard while on shore; but Chloe was impatient to be with "her chile" once more, and Ben said:

"Go with her now, and that part of the work will be settled. When you get back we shall have a chance to talk while we're eating dinner."

Then the ex-cook went on shore the second time and Ben was left alone for half an hour, at the expiration of which the two set out in search of the long-deferred meal.

In one of the Cuban cafés, with its cages of singing birds, Pride of India trees and multiplicity of parrots, the two ordered an elaborate dinner, during the progress of which Jake repeated over and over again, amid his criticism of the cooking, that which he had learned from the lawyer.

As near as Ben could ascertain he had simply been assured that there was no chance that Dr. Harlan could work her any harm now that his character was so well known by the judge before whom the case had been presented; but he told this so many times that it seemed as if he had a great amount of news to impart.

"I tell you, lad, that man lives in swell style, an' I reckon she won't hanker after anything she can't get while he has charge of her."

"And there's no chance the doctor can steal her away?"

"Not a bit. Why, I had mighty hard work to get inter the house till I explained all the whys an' wherefores of my comin' to a big nigger, an' I tell you, my boy, she's as snug as a bug in a rug."

"That will be more than we can say for ourselves if the doctor sails into the harbor before dark," Ben replied with a laugh, and then after paying a moderate price for a highly satisfactory meal, the two walked leisurely down to the dock.

Once on board their own craft but little attention was paid to anything in the vicinity. Now that Gertie was in a place of safety there was nothing to fear, and for the time at least, Dr. Harlan had not so much as a place in their thoughts. It was as if the anxiety of the previous day and night had been so great that all fear of him fled with the departure of his step-daughter.

In his mind, however, they probably occupied quite a conspicuous place, for he arrived in port about a half an hour after Jake and Ben had gone on board to think over their very satisfactory dinner, and both were more surprised than pleased at hearing him hail them from the dock.

"I want to know where my daughter is?" he asked angrily when Jake showed his good-natured face above the companion-way.

"Your daughter?" the ex-cook repeated, as if he was hearing of such a person for the first time, and Ben crouched close behind him, believing they were about to have a very disagreeable interview.

"Yes, my daughter, for the law recognizes her as such!" the man screamed, his face absolutely livid with passion. "She was on board this boat last night, and I insist on knowing where she is now."

"Then you'll have to go up town to find out," Jake replied with an exasperating drawl, "for she isn't here."

"I'll come on board and see," the man cried, leaping on the deck as he spoke, and Ben, thinking the time had come when Jake needed assistance, stepped out into the cockpit.

"Don't get into a fret," the ex-cook said in a tone calculated to excite rather than calm the visitor's anger. "If it'll do you any good, an' you ask it as a favor, we'll let you go below. But dare to put on any high an' mighty airs, an' overboard you go, for this is our craft so long as we choose to hire her."

For one single instant it seemed as if the quack was about to rush upon Jake with an intent to do him bodily injury, and Ben seized the tiller in anticipation of a fight; but the visitor, understanding that he might get worsted in an encounter, stepped back a few paces as he said threateningly:

"Remember that I have certain rights in law which are not to be trifled with. I demand to know if my step-daughter is here?"

"An' I told you she wasn't. If you come on board here it is at your own peril, an' unless I'm way off my reckonin', the law gives us the right to throw you overboard if we choose."

"Let him look into the cabin if he wants to, Jake," Ben cried, "and then it will be best for him to get ashore as quickly as he can."

"The boy is skipper now, so you can take a peep at our saloon," Jake said with a mocking bow, and it was not necessary for the doctor to make any very lengthy examination. A single glance was sufficient to show that the tiny cabin had no occupants, and he cried in a shrill tone as he shook his fist in the ex-cook's face:

"You shall answer for this before another day has passed, and I will have you arrested for abducting my daughter."

"Do as you please to-morrow, but just now you'll get ashore mighty lively, or I'll give you a chance to swim."

There was no mistaking the fact that the former cook of the Sea Queen was very angry, and Dr. Harlan understood that it was not safe to stay on board any longer. In a very undignified manner he clambered onto the pier, and once in a place of safety gave vent to his rage in a multiplicity of angry words and gesticulations expressive of what he would do in the way of revenge when the proper time arrived.

"Will we go ashore an' knock his two eyes into one?" Jake asked while the man was dancing about in grotesque rage on the string-piece of the pier.

"No, let him alone, but if he attempts to come on board again it will be at his own risk," Ben replied, swinging the tiller around in a savage way, while the doctor, evidently believing it would be of no use to prolong what was a profitless conversation, jumped into a small boat that had been moored near the head of the dock and rowed to his own craft a short distance away.

"What'll we do now?" Ben asked when the quack disappeared over the side of the boat.

"Go to sleep, of course," Jake replied calmly. "He won't come back, for he knows Gertie isn't here, and we've got to make up for last night's wakefulness."

It was good advice. Without fear of another visit from the irate man they went into the cuddy to get the rest both so sadly needed, and neither awakened to consciousness until the next morning, when Captain Irwin had shouted half a dozen times from the string-piece of the dock:

"Sleeping late, ain't you?" he asked as Ben's head appeared through the companion-way, and before any reply could be made he was on board ready to hear the story of their adventures during the past few days.

It was some time before a detailed account had been given, and then the captain said:

"Well, I reckon the child's troubles are nearly over. It is probable that the court will appoint me her guardian, and then we can go back to our cottage, for between all three of us I don't fancy the doctor will be able to steal her away. The matter of the salvage on the Mermaid's cargo is progressing finely, and we can count on being ready to leave here in a month at the longest."

Neither Jake nor Ben had much interest in anything except Gertie's welfare just at that moment, and neither was sufficiently curious regarding the goods of the wrecked vessel to ask the probable amount which might be awarded them.

Acting upon Captain Irwin's suggestion the boat which had served them so well was delivered up to her owners, the amount due for her use was paid, and the remains of their outfit, now a very limited collection, was carried to the hired cottage.

"I reckon I'll snug the kitchen up a bit," Jake said, as if delighted because of the opportunity, and determined to make the most of it during Chloe's absence. "How long do you allow it'll be before the court tells Gertie whether the quack's her father or not?"

"The attorney himself couldn't answer that question. We've got to wait for the law to take its course, and there's no use trying to hurry matters," the captain replied as he left the house to visit the lawyer.

"If they'd let me at that judge about ten minutes I'd soon show him how the thing oughter be fixed," and Jake leaned on the broom in deep reflection for several seconds, as if trying to decide whether he should make an effort at once to convince the court of its duty. "You see lawyers allers fool 'round a good while so's to make more wages."

"Since Captain Irwin can't hurry 'em up, I don't believe you'd be able to do much at it," Ben said, and Jake replied in a very decided tone:

"I ain't so sure of that, lad. Could he a' sneaked away from the quack any neater than I did? When I take hold of a job it's allers done up pretty slick; but I s'pose the captain thinks he can sling more style than me, an' I'm willin' to say that that's what counts sometimes."

Then Jake resumed his sweeping, Ben set about building the fire, and during the next half-hour but little conversation was indulged in, for both were thinking how lonely it seemed without Gertie.

When night came the legal question had not been settled, greatly to the disappointment of those who were so deeply interested, and a second and a third day passed in the same unsatisfactory manner. Gertie, Chloe and the cat remained at the attorney's home, while Ben and Jake wandered around the cottage disconsolately, trying in vain to curb their impatience, and at times even going so far as to threaten to take the law in their own hands by carrying away the child once more.

On the second day Captain Irwin reported that Dr. Harlan had been around the city breathing threats of the most dire vengeance against those who had so successfully eluded him.

"Barkin' dogs don't often bite," Jake said when the captain related this bit of news, "an' I reckon Ben an' me will live jest as long as if he'd gone down with the Sea Queen as he oughter done."

"In a legal way he is powerless," the captain said musingly, "but it isn't well to feel too safe, for he is an unscrupulous man, and in this city it is not difficult to hire another to make an attack. I think you and Ben had better keep pretty snug till the matter is settled."

"I'm willin' to do that so far as stayin' in the house is concerned," the ex-cook replied in a dissatisfied tone, "but I don't like to let him think we're afraid."

"Never mind what he thinks, so that no more trouble comes to us," the captain said, and then he walked away as if to show that the conversation was ended.

Jake and Ben had no real desire to stroll around the city, save as it might be to show Dr. Harlan that they had no fear; but the captain's suggestion was virtually a command, and both remained at home, the former spending the greater portion of his time grumbling at the slow course of justice in Key West.

Thursday was a day of rejoicing at the cottage, for about eleven o'clock in the forenoon, when the ex-cook and his companion had begun to despair of ever seeing Gertie again, she and Chloe walked into the house, the latter carrying the kitten whose neck was decorated with a remarkably large bow of blue ribbon.

"We'se done gone fixed eberyting," Chloe said as she sunk panting and breathless into a chair, which creaked and groaned under her weight. "De captin am her pappy now, an' de doctor man's gwine down to Mexico all by hisself."

"Is it really settled at last?" Ben cried as Jake took the child in his arms to show his joy at her return.

"Indeed it is. Captain Irwin told us to come here, for the judge has appointed him my guardian, and Dr. Harlan is going away this afternoon in the steamer. Chloe and I have had a perfectly splendid time at the lawyer's house, but we're awfully glad to get back with you and Ben."

"It's mighty lucky you come jest as you did," the ex-cook said sternly. "If they'd fooled round another day tryin' to settle a case that was as plain as the nose on a man's face, me an' Ben would a' straightened the thing up by gettin' another boat an' carryin' you so far off that all the judges in Key West couldn't a' found us."

"Dere's gwine ter be no mo' gallivantin' in dem aig-shells," Chloe added quickly. "I tole de captin I'se done got frou wid sich nonsense, an' he declared he'd put his foot right down on fool work like dat. But what hab you an' dat wuffless Jake bin up to now?" she asked, surveying the room, while a look of distress came over her black face. "It seems like de pigs had bin rootin' roun', 'stead ob a place fur 'spectable folks."

Then Chloe arose slowly with many a groan and gasp, and five minutes later she was raising so much dust in her efforts to set the house to rights that Jake and Ben were literally driven out of doors.

The Castaways — Chapter XXVI

An Undisputed Departure

When Ben and Jake were in the yard, and old Chloe was making preparations for a regular siege of house-cleaning, while the dust was coming from the open windows like little clouds of smoke, the cook said mournfully:

“It seems like we didn’t have a chance to feel glad ’cause they’d got back. It’s a puzzler to me why a woman thinks she must have a broom in her hand all the time. I couldn’t see any dirt to speak of, an’ yet Chloe an’ Gertie will find it everywhere, I s’pose.”

“Which goes to prove that we’re mighty poor housekeepers,” Ben replied with a hearty laugh, for the look of dejection on Jake’s face was comical in the extreme.

“I ain’t willin’ to give in to that, lad. If there’s dirt hid away in the room where nobody can see it, what merit is it to drag every grain out?”

“Or what good does it do for us to try and prove that our plan of keepin’ house is the best, so long as old Chloe believes to the contrary? It’ll be two or three hours before she gets things so far to rights that it’ll be comfortable inside, and are we going to stand out here all this time?”

“I dunno,” the cook replied meekly. “Where do you think we’d better go?”

“Let’s see the last of Dr. Harlan in Key West. Gertie said he was to leave this afternoon, so he must be intending to take the Mexican steamer.”

“I ain’t over an’ above anxious to look at his ugly face agin,” Jake said in a tone of indecision. “We’ve had about enough of him to last the remainder of our natural lives.”

“But we can make sure he has really gone. I sha’n’t be positive but that he is sneakin’ ’round to get hold of Gertie unless I see him on board the steamer.”

“There’s a good deal of truth in that, my boy, an’ we’ll have the matter settled. Come on, the steamer sails in less than an hour, an’ we haven’t got any time to lose.”

During the walk to the dock Jake discussed the possibility of Dr. Harlan’s remaining on the island for the purpose of trying to get Gertie in his power regardless of the court’s decree, and he spoke of what “might be” so strongly that Ben begun to look upon the arguments as facts. By the time they arrived

at the pier he was in a very uncomfortable frame of mind, and the prospects of peace, which had been so bright an hour previous, were decidedly dull.

"I don't see nothin' of him," Jake said, indulging once more in his former habit of finding pleasure in being miserable. "He's most likely up to the hotel waitin' till it's safe to come snoopin' 'round our house agin."

Ben searched eagerly from one end of the pier to the other, even going on board the steamer; but the quack was not there, and just when he had become fully convinced Jake was correct in his surmise, Gertie's step-father appeared in view.

That he intended to leave the island there could now be no doubt, and it was equally certain he had made preparations for continuing his trade in nostrums. He had two large trunks and a number of small bundles loaded on a dray, while he led the short procession with the air of one who feels positive of victory in his own special line of business.

"He's been makin' more stuff to sell," Jake said in a hoarse whisper, "an' I reckon he calculates on pullin' teeth for every greaser in Mexico; but he couldn't do very much in that line jest now."

As a matter of fact, the doctor was hardly in condition to attend to patients. To drown his chagrin at being obliged to leave without his step-daughter, or from some other cause, he had been indulging in liquor to such an extent that his steps were far from steady. He lurched from one side to the other at imminent risk of falling under the wheels of the dray, and the more erratic his course, the louder he scolded the porters for loitering, although they were moving on as rapidly as possible while he was in advance.

The loungers were making sport of the tipsy quack in very uncomplimentary terms; but he was oblivious to everything but his own importance until arriving at the foot of the gang-plank, when he caught sight of Ben.

"You little scoundrel!" he cried, lunging forward. "If it had not been for your meddling my daughter would not be separated from her father."

"It's a mighty lucky thing for her that somebody meddled," Jake said jeeringly; but the doctor paid no attention to the remark.

Continuing on toward Ben in as nearly a direct course as his condition would permit, he cried savagely:

"You need to be taken down a peg or two, an' I'm going to do it. I'll give you such a flogging as won't leave a whole bone in your body."

Jake was several paces away when this threat was made; but as the drunken man started forward he leaped toward Ben to lend his assistance if it should be necessary.

Ben had no idea, however, of remaining where he would be caught so easily. When the quack was within two or three paces he sprang aside behind one of the hawser piles, and with nothing to check his headway, Dr. Harlan lurched over the string-piece into the water.

"That'll sober the fool off, I reckon," Jake said calmly, as he looked down at the struggling man who could be seen just beneath the surface.

"Let him stay there half an hour or so, and he'll have more sense," some one among the crowd shouted, and to Ben it seemed as if no effort was to be made to save him from drowning. As a matter of fact the crew of the steamer were getting out life-lines; but he did not see them, and without a thought of the enmity between this man and himself, he leaped over.

The water was so clear that even the smallest objects could be seen on the bottom, and to seize the quack's coat was not a difficult matter. To hold him above the surface, however, was by no means as easy. The involuntary bath had not dispelled the fumes of liquor from the man's brain, and instantly Ben raised him he flung his arms around the boy's neck.

Unable to free himself from the grasp, it was impossible for Ben to keep his head above water, and for some seconds it looked very much as if both would be drowned.

Fortunately a canoe partially loaded with fish was moored near the head of the wharf, and into this Jake leaped when Ben made the first motion toward going overboard. It was not more than a minute that the two were struggling beneath the surface before he was directly above them, and by aid of lines from the steamer the rescue was soon effected.



The ex-cook pulled Ben into the canoe, but held the doctor at arm's length until a rope was passed under his arms, when the sailors hauled him on board the steamer with but little ceremony.

"That settles him, an' now we'll go home to get you wrung out an' dried," Jake said, as he made the canoe fast at its old mooring place, and helped his companion upon the pier.

"The water won't hurt me, an' I'm goin' to stay right here till I'm sure he has left the island," Ben replied as he made his way toward the gang-plank once more.

"But there's no danger of the quack's comin' on shore agin; he's too drunk an' too wet."

"It won't be a great while before the steamer starts, an' I'd rather make sure," Ben said in such a decided tone that Jake ceased his remonstrances.

Several of the bystanders praised the would-be rescuer, and some offered him money; but he showed such a thorough aversion either to listening or receiving payment that after a few moments he was left alone with Jake.

Then came the last flurry of excitement which always attends a departure, no matter how long it has been delayed, and as the crew rushed to and fro in an apparently aimless fashion, while the shouting of officers, escaping steam, or cries from those on the dock added to the confusion, Ben kept his eyes fixed

on the gang-plank until it was hauled inboard. The hawsers were cast off, the screw begun to churn the water into a foam, and as the steamer glided away from the pier Ben said to Jake, with a long-drawn sigh of relief:

"He's gone now for sure, and I hope we'll never see him again."

"Anybody would a' thought he was your best friend by the way you went overboard after him."

"I couldn't stand still while he was drowning, no matter how much of an enemy he was."

"It would a' been better to let him had a little more of a taste. He oughter staid on the bottom till he got black in the face, then perhaps he'd a' learned to behave himself."

"And while you was waiting for his face to get black he might have died."

"The world would a' got on jest as well," Jake replied with the air of wisdom, and then he added: "Come on now, an' get some dry clothes. I expect old Chloe will make things mighty lively for us when she finds out that you've been overboard."

Ben was not exactly certain how his attempt at lifesaving might be looked upon at home, more especially when taken in connection with his very moist condition, and he acted on the suggestion at once.

The work of house-cleaning was concluded, at least for a while, and Chloe was in the kitchen with Gertie and the cat when the two entered. For a moment the old woman did not notice that Ben's clothes were wet; but Gertie's exclamation of surprise caused her to be aware of the fact, and turning to Jake she asked angrily:

"Wha' you bin doin' to that chile? 'Pears to me like you're allers gittin' trouble onto somebody."

"You didn't think that the night we started up the gulf to give the quack a show of our heels. Seems to me I got you all out of trouble that time, aunty," and Jake seated himself near the window with a very comical assumption of dignity.

"Where have you been?" Gertie asked, and Ben replied, as he stood first on one foot and then the other in the vain effort to prevent the water from running on the clean floor.

"We went down to the steamer so's to make sure Dr. Harlan left town. He was kinder tipsy an' fell overboard, an' I jumped after him."

Old Chloe looked up in open-mouthed astonishment.

"Yes, an' Ben come mighty near gettin' drowned himself," Jake added.

"Now don' go to skeerin' de chile out ob her senses wid yer foolishness," Chloe cried as Gertie's eyes began to fill with tears, and then she bustled around with a great show of activity, adding to Ben: "Go right away an' get on some dry clo'es. I s'pose it was Christian-like to help de po' sinful man out ob de water, but you'se gwine to ketch yer death ob cold ef yer stan' roun' like dat."

"But I haven't any dry ones to put on, aunty. This is the only suit I've got."

"Den make dat wuffless Jake get some ob his," the old woman said as she literally pushed Ben out of the room, and the ex-cook followed after winking at Gertie as if to say that he was not disturbed by any epithets which Chloe might bestow upon him.

There was plenty of opportunity for mirth when Ben came down stairs, owing to the peculiarity of his costume. Jake had fitted him out with an entire suit, trousers and vest of his own, and a storm-coat belonging to Captain Irwin. He looked, as Chloe said, "like a pea in a quart measure," and probably felt quite as uncomfortable as his appearance indicated.

When Captain Irwin came home he knew all about the rescue of Dr. Harlan, and said as he took Ben by the hand:

"I'm proud of you, my boy. First, because you would face danger to aid one who was helpless, and again because there was no question as to whether it was an enemy or a friend."

Ben's face grew rosy red as he listened to these words of praise from one whose opinion he valued so highly, and Gertie danced around him in very excess of joy because it was her particular friend who had proven himself so brave.

"I think we can safely say our affairs are prospering, now that the quack has gone," the captain continued. "It is only a matter of time before we can go North and look for another ship, and as for the question of salvage, that must soon be settled in our favor."

"Are you going to sea again?" Ben asked, as if surprised that the captain should think of such a thing after enduring so many hardships.

"Of course, my boy. What else can old shell-backs like Jake and I do to earn a living? We must have a home for you children, and it won't come without hard work."

"We mus' hab a home," Chloe said, as if there was no question but that she was a member of the family. "I'se done gone got sick ob totin' roun' in dis yere shiffless way."

“You sha’n’t do it any more after we reach New York, aunty, that I promise,” the captain replied cheerily. “I want a snug anchorage on shore as much as the rest of the family do, an’ we’ll have it before long.”

“Bress de Lawd, I hope so,” old Chloe added fervently, and then she busied herself with getting supper while Jake criticised her methods of cooking until she threatened to drive him out of doors, after which he remained silent until the meal was prepared.

The Castaways — Chapter XXVII

Salvage

It would have been a hard task to find a happier family, either on the keys or the mainland, than that composed of the castaways. Since Dr. Harlan had taken his departure there was nothing to fear, and Gertie and Ben, with Jake acting as guard and guide, explored every portion of that quaint little city known as Key West.

Each morning they visited the market, where provisions of all kinds are disposed of at auction rather than by private sale, and the novelty of such a proceeding afforded them no slight amount of amusement. At other times, and very often, they went to the docks where the sponge-fishers, with a fleet of boats towed behind a wide-beamed schooner, brought from the gulf all sorts of queer-looking marine plants, shells or turtles.

The fish-wharf, crowded with smacks, canoes or tiny vessels was another favorite resort, and Gertie was soon able to give the proper names to the grunts, groupers, porgies, snappers, hog-fish, Jew-fish, yellow-tails, spots, Spanish mackerel or king-fish.

At least twice each week the little party searched for shells, always returning home with a large collection of beautiful specimens, and once Jake hired a sponge-fisher's outfit, which they used unsuccessfully for about twelve hours.

During an excursion to the fish market they saw three of the Seminole Indians from their reservation in the Everglades, and very disappointing was the sight to Gertie. She had expected that real Indians always wore plenty of feathers, carried a quantity of weapons, and were fierce in the extreme; but here was Little Tiger, Big Charley and Tommy Doctor appearing as mild as Quakers.

They wore calico shirts, buckskin leggings and moccasins, with huge, bright-colored turbans; but with neither hatchet nor scalping-knife in sight, and they bargained and haggled over the sale of their fish like any peaceable native.

Ben wanted to ask them about their villages on the mainland; but Gertie felt such a sense of injury at their very ordinary appearance that she would not stop for an interview, and when the children left, the son of the once dreaded

Tiger Tail was disputing with a negro woman over the price of a very small snapper.

The time of waiting for the adjudication of the salvage claim seemed neither long nor dreary, even though it was six weeks before the matter was settled. Old Chloe was well content to remain at home with the cat; Captain Irwin had quite as much business on hand as could be attended to, and the others spent nearly all the hours of daylight in the open air.

Finally the day came when there was nothing more for which the castaways were obliged to remain at Key West. The claim for salvage was adjusted, and Ben was absolutely astonished at his share of the amount, which proved to be one thousand dollars. Captain Irwin received three thousand, while Jake and the sole survivor of the Mermaid were awarded two thousand each.

"It was hard work," Captain Irwin said on the night after the money had been paid and "the family" were discussing the matter, "but we made good wages. How much of your father's money was spent for Gertie, Ben?"

"Almost two hundred dollars."

"Then you've got eighteen hundred in all, and the three of us are worth nearly seven thousand dollars, quite enough for a good start in business. Now, I have a proposition to make, and if it doesn't suit either you or Jake, don't hesitate to say so. There is a little schooner called the Restless--one of the prettiest models I ever saw--lying off the fish-wharf for sale. She has been in the New York fruit trade; but her captain, who was also the owner, is dead, and his heirs want to dispose of her for cash. We can close the bargain for five thousand dollars, and she is actually worth seven. I have been talking with the firm who chartered her during the past three years, and they agree to give me the first call if I buy her. Now, I'll take three-fifths, and Jake and Ben one-fifth each, or we'll go in as equal partners."

"How large is she?" the cook asked.

"One hundred and eighty tons, with the neatest little galley that ever held a stove."

"Then I go in for buying her," Jake replied promptly.

"How much will one-third cost?" Ben asked.

"Sixteen hundred and sixty-six dollars and a few cents."

"Then I go in for an equal share," Ben said, delighted at having such an opportunity to become a ship-owner, and Jake concluded that it would be to

his advantage to own as much as either of his companions, instead of allowing the captain to be the largest stockholder.

"We'll go down to-morrow morning and have one more look at her. Chloe and Gertie had better come along also, for they'll surely want to know what the cabin is like."

"Is she hitched up to de wharf?" the old woman asked quickly.

"No; she's anchored out in the harbor; but one of the tenders is moored at McKesson and Robbins' dock, and it is large enough----"

"Dey can't make dem little aig-shells big enuff fur yer ole mammy," Chloe said with great emphasis. "I'se 'bused my po' bones too much sence I done lef' Georgy, an' I ain't gwine to drag 'em 'round any mo'."

"Then you shall stay here and cook a regular thanksgiving dinner, for most likely it will be ship-owners instead of poor castaways who'll dine with you this noon."

"Who ever dey is de vittles 'll be right dar smokin' hot, an' it won't be no sich trash as sailor-men hab ter eat."

"Just wait till you get on board of our schooner to go to New York," Jake said, laughing heartily at the old woman's allusion to his skill as a cook, "an' then you'll find out that sailor-men ain't starved, more especially them as lives in the cabin."

"I spects dat'll be the time when I'se done gone choked to deaf fur a piece of bread," old Chloe replied, raising her hands in horror with such a quick motion that the cat, who had been sleeping peacefully on her broad lap, jumped down in alarm.

The prospective ship-owners were ready to inspect the schooner at a very early hour next morning, and when they arrived on board Jake and Ben were in a perfect fever of delight.

The Restless had indeed a beautiful model, and Captain Irwin's praise of her was not half-strong enough, so his companions thought. As she swung at anchor, pulling gently at her cables now and then, the spectator would have said that she was a pleasure yacht, and but one glance at the shapely black hull with its narrow band of gilt, was necessary to give a good idea of how swiftly she would fly before the wind when her white wings were spread.

"I never saw nothin' like her before," Jake said, as he stood aft and looked forward across the decks, which glistened white and smooth in the sunlight. "It don't seem as if a craft like this oughter be made to work."

"She was built especially for the fruit trade, and I fancy that nothing can catch her when once she's given her head," Captain Irwin said with an air of pride. "Now we'll show Gertie the cabin, and then look around forward."

The saloon, which seemed very large for a craft the size of the *Restless*, was what one might expect from the appearance of the outside--cool, dainty and finished in the best of taste, with various kinds and colors of polished wood. The furniture was cane, with the exception of a stationary dining-table, and the swinging-trays of highly polished glasses, lamps and mirrors gave a sparkle and life to the interior which exactly accorded with Gertie's fancy.

Leading from this apartment were four tiny state-rooms, each containing two bunks, a chest of drawers, wash-stand, mirror, lamp and one chair. These sleeping quarters were not more than half as large as those on the *Sea Queen*, but that was by no means a serious defect in the eyes of the party who proposed to purchase what Captain Irwin pronounced the most perfect vessel he had ever seen.

"She's just beautiful!" Gertie exclaimed, after every room had been inspected and they were in the saloon once more. "If you buy her, and let Chloe, the cat and me sail with you all the time, there'll be nothing more for which we can ask."

"I'm afraid you would think differently after we made two or three voyages and you saw other girls with pretty dresses or trinkets," the captain said laughingly. "I'll promise that you shall cruise in her now and then; but you and Ben are going to school when we arrive in New York, and it'll be a couple of years at least before he signs the shipping papers."

"Then we'll spend our vacations on board, and call every night while you are in port," Gertie said gleefully as the captain led the way forward, where Jake in turn expressed his perfect satisfaction with that portion of the schooner which would most naturally interest him.

"That's a galley what is a galley, an' after I've been in it twenty-four hours I'll knock old Chloe's eye out with the style of our dinners, or agree never to lift a skillet agin."

From stem to stern, above and below, the prospective purchasers of the *Restless* went on their tour of inspection, and when it was finished no one had a single fault to find. It was not necessary for the captain to ask Jake and Ben if they were still willing to buy the schooner; both urged him to go on shore with the least possible delay and conclude the trade, lest some one else should accept the offer.

Two hours later the transfer of the jaunty little vessel was effected, and when they went home to the feast Chloe was supposed to be preparing, the Restless had been chartered to load with fruit as soon as she could be made ready for sea.

Old Chloe was the only one who did not feel delighted because of this accession of property, and her failure to participate in the general joy arose from the dislike of trusting her precious body on the water again.

“I don’t like dis yere scurryin’ ’roun’ on de sea,” she said very decidedly. “Ef yer wants ter go any whar in de steam-cars, Mammy Chloe’s on han’, an’ den she knows all de time whar she is; but dis gittin’ inter a little boat an’ bein’ blowed frum one part ob de world to de odder is jes’ flyin’ in de face ob Providence, kase yer nebber knows notin’ ’bout youseself.”

“We won’t ask you to take but one trip, aunty,” Captain Irwin said when mirth would permit of speech. “After we arrive in New York you shall be anchored in some comfortable little cottage, and you needn’t ever so much as look at water, except while washing your face.”

“If I kin drag my po’ ole bones dat far it’ll be a marcy,” Chloe said with a sigh, “but I ’specs we’s all gwine ter be drowned two or free times ’fore we gits dere.”

The Castaways — Chapter XXVIII

The Shore Anchorage

The day on which the good schooner *Restless* became their property was the last Captain Irwin's party spent at Key West in the same aimless fashion as the six weeks previous had been passed.

On the following morning each one had quite as much as he or she could do, for according to the terms of the charter it was necessary the vessel should leave port at the earliest possible moment.

The captain had a variety of duties which could only be attended to by himself. To Jake was left the work of buying and putting aboard the provisions; Ben and Gertie were detailed to set the cabin to rights, help Chloe pack up such household goods as they owned, and look after their removal.

On the second day the task of loading the schooner was begun, and forty-eight hours later the *Restless* left the harbor bound north. Four sailors, one of whom was to act as mate, had been hired, and with such help as Jake and Ben could give, she had crew enough to handle her in any kind of weather.

Of course Chloe, Gertie and the cat were installed in one of the state-rooms; Captain Irwin occupied the second, while the mate had another, and it was supposed that Ben and the cook would divide the last between them, but Jake insisted on sleeping in the fore-castle, even though he was a third owner of the vessel, giving the following as his reason:

"You see, I never have lived aft, an' it's hard work teachin' old dogs new tricks. Then, agin, no matter if half the schooner was mine, I'm only the cook after all, an' it don't do for the captain of the galley to sling too much style."

After that explanation no one attempted to dissuade him from his purpose. He did not think it out of place to visit the cabin very often during his leisure moments, nor did he forget his intention to "knock Chloe's eye out" by a series of elaborate meals. It seemed as if each contained a greater variety of food than the one preceding, and before two days elapsed the old woman was willing to admit that he was skillful.

"He's de fustest man I'se eber seen what was wuff his salt in a kitchen," she said confidentially to Gertie. "He kin turn out what tastes mighty good, but bress yer heart, honey, it's only kase he's on de water. Wait till we fin' dat

home de captin tells 'bout, an' den he won't 'mount to scarcely nuffin' at all side ob yer ole mammy."

It was as if the Restless tried on this first voyage to convince her new owners that they had not been mistaken in regard to her speed. With strong, favoring winds she fairly flew over the water, and it is an actual fact, as Ben can prove by certain newspaper cuttings which he preserves very carefully, that she arrived at New York in two hours' less time than was occupied by the mail steamer during the same week.

The passengers did not land immediately after the schooner reached the dock. They already looked upon her cabin as home, therefore it was decided that all should remain on board until after the cargo was discharged, when the captain would have plenty of time in which to make the necessary arrangements.

Before a week passed every detail had been settled regarding the "shore anchorage." The old French lady with whom Captain Irwin was acquainted, Madame Servoise, was not only willing, but very happy to be installed as the superintendent of such a home as it was proposed to make, and at once set out to search for a dwelling, after which matters progressed finely.

A little cottage on the banks of the Hudson River, with a view of the water, such as would be pleasing to Captain Irwin, and a garden that gave Chloe visions of table luxuries grown under her own eyes, was the place selected. It was but a short walk from the school which Ben and Gertie were to attend, and to the castaways who had never before known what a real home was, it filled every requirement.

Chloe was allowed to fit up her own especial domain--the kitchen--as best pleased her, and never was a purchaser more captious than she when the culinary articles were selected.

"I'se gwine ter hab what's mos' needed," she said privately to Gertie, "so's I kin show dat wuffless Jake de meanin' ob a good cook. 'Pears like he's swelled all up kase we ate so much on de schooner, an' yer ole aunty's gwine ter fill him up full once, so's he can't talk 'bout his own vittles."

She succeeded, as a matter of fact, for the first dinner in the new house was such an one as would have tempted the appetite of the daintiest epicure, and to the old woman's great delight Jake did full justice to the meal.

"You ain't a bad cook, aunty," he said, when it was not possible for him to eat any more, "an' I allow you can get up what's good for a man's stomach; but

jest wait till I own half of the Restless instead of one-third. Then the whole cabin is to be turned into a galley, an' I'll have a chance to swing myself."

Chloe made no reply. She knew the change in the schooner Jake spoke of would never be made and the amount of food he had eaten was sufficient praise.

If it were only possible to show you that home now, after it has been occupied all these years, you would acknowledge that there could be none more pleasant. Yet though such a long time has elapsed, that little cottage where the cat, which was once believed to be supernatural, is spending her declining days in comfort, save when an over-bold mouse causes some trouble, is one of the most delightful places at which to visit, and a guest is always eager to return.

Sometimes, when he is in a particularly good humor, Jake admits that he gets better meals ashore than on the Restless, and it is positive Captain Irwin looks forward impatiently to the days when he can remain permanently with his family in New York.

It has been a number of years since the Sea Queen started out on her last voyage, and Ben and Gertie are now so far embarked on the sea of life that she wears a pretty diamond ring on her forefinger, apparently thinking it very precious, for it was presented by the young mate of the Restless.

Perhaps it would be well to look back for a moment to the time when Captain Irwin's "family" first began housekeeping, for there were one or two incidents which occurred shortly afterward that may be interesting.

When the Restless arrived in port at the end of the second voyage after she was owned by those who spent so many days on Content Key, Captain Irwin made it his business to search for Chloe's Moses, and after some difficulty succeeded in finding him at a hotel on Broadway, where he was employed as waiter.

Of course Moses was delighted to hear from his mother, whom he had believed to be dead, and quite naturally he took advantage of the first opportunity to call upon her.

Prepared in advance for the visit, Chloe sat in the kitchen with her turban twisted a trifle tighter than usual, and her fat face fairly glistening with motherly affection.

Mrs. Servoise was at the window when Moses came up the stoop, and, just for an instant, she might perhaps have thought her visitor was a fragment of some dyspeptic rainbow. The most conspicuous portions of his costume were

the shirt-front, collar and cuffs, bedecked with colored illustrations of horseshoes, jockeys' caps, whips and spurs. A red and blue neck-tie, with broad bars of yellow, hung out over the black, white and green checks on his clothes, and a small cane with a very large handle lent a general finish to the whole.

Ben and Gertie were almost as much interested in this meeting between mother and son as the old woman herself, and the former admitted the gorgeous youth while the latter followed the others to the very door of the kitchen.

Chloe started to her feet as the boy entered, but instead of folding him to her bosom as the watchers in the hall-way anticipated, she retreated toward the stove in real or simulated fear.

"G'way, g'way from h'yar!" she cried, waving her hands nervously. "Wha' you fool nigger doin' in dis house?"

"Why, don't you know me, mammy? Has I growed so fine dat you fail to dismember yer own chile?"

"G'way, g'way; don' come one inch funder, or I'll scald you, suah! My Mose wasn't no sich jumpin'-jack as you is; he was a 'spectable nigger when he lef' his ole mammy."

Ben and Gertie were nearly convulsed with mirth at the tableau presented just at this moment. In the corner stood old Chloe with both black hands held in front of her to keep the gorgeous apparition at a respectful distance, and in the center of the room, his mouth wide open with astonishment, stood Moses, gazing at his mother as if fearing her senses had suddenly taken their leave.

"You'se wrong, mammy, you'se wrong. I'se de same Mose what sent fur you to come up Norf, an' I'se gettin' erlong right smart."

"My boy sent for me," Chloe said, speaking slowly and with considerable dignity, "an' I'se done gone got pretty nigh dead gettin' here; but it wasn't fur sich a hollyhock as you is dat I dragged my pore ole bones ober de sea. G'way, I tells yer, an' ef you see my Mose when he's 'specterable, sen' him up here ter me."

It was useless for Moses to insist that his position in society demanded a faultless costume, and all in vain did he plead with her to "be sensible." She positively refused to recognize him until he "looked decent," and not until he presented himself in less gorgeous array would she even treat him with civility.

And the old woman conquered, for on the following evening he called again dressed according to her ideas of good taste, and received as affectionate a greeting as the most loving child could have desired. To-day he is general assistant on board the *Restless*, and both Jake and Ben give Chloe glowing reports of his industry and good character.

Nothing was heard regarding Dr. Harlan for nearly two years after the law had given to Gertie a guardian, and then Captain Irwin brought from Key West reliable information of his death. During that time he had remained in the City of Mexico selling his nostrums, when not wholly intoxicated, and while trying to extract a tooth for an unwilling patient, but succeeding only in breaking the man's jaw, he was killed.

It would be affectation to say that Gertie mourned for him. Her earliest memories were of his cruelty to her mother, and later came personal fear, after which the knowledge that he was dead could not but be a relief.

And now a final word.

Next fall Ben takes command of the *Restless*, Captain Irwin believing it is time for him to retire from active life; the little schooner has earned a comfortable competency for her owners, and both he and Jake will live on shore the remainder of their days. Chloe is also to resign in favor of a younger cook; her time of labor is well nigh spent, and, as Jake says, the old people will have nothing to do but watch for the arrival of the fruiter.

Ben is to be her captain when she goes again to Key West for a cargo, and with him will be Mrs. Clark, for whom Chloe is to officiate the last time in the kitchen when she makes the wedding cake. It is safe to assume that the young captain will be both happy and prosperous, and never forget that his wife as well as his fortune came from that one attempt to catch a turtle, which resulted in five people becoming the most intimate of friends when they could no longer be called castaways.

The Paw-Paw Hunt

“Well,” said Phil critically, “I never thought that box of tools would be of the least earthly use to you, Ned. But that’s as good a bookcase as any cabinet-maker could turn out.”

“Yes, sir! That’s pretty fair.” Ned Holmes stood up, wiping his hot face. “The thing’s not hard to put together. But when you come to this polishing--first varnish and then sandpaper, varnish and sandpaper--it almost cracks your back.”

The boys were in the back yard, where Ned had made his workshop under the big walnut. They were just out of school, and Phil had followed Ned home. Carpentering was the last hobby. Just then they heard Ned’s sister Fan, with two or three other girls, come down the street to the gate.

“Let’s go in and see Ned at work,” cried Jenny Symons, with her usual giggle.

“Ned don’t like to be bothered,” whispered Fanny.

“Dear me! The Grand Turk, is he? Well, I’m not going to bother him.”

In they came.

“Isn’t it splendid?”

“How nice! Why, it’s perfectly lovely!”

“La! Did you really do it all yourself, N-- Mr. Holmes?”

Ned and Phil were near enough to the age of “beaux” to touch their hats and say, “Good-evening, ladies.” Then they both stooped and began to sandpaper, as if for their lives.

“I can’t do anything, with a lot of girls cluttering about,” muttered Ned, not so low but that Jenny and her companions heard him, and after a few more giggles and tosses of the head they flounced off, leaving Fan and Phil’s sister Maggie on the steps.

“Do we worry you, Ned?” asked Fan.

“Not if you sit there.”

Phil and he then continued their conversation, which was couched in mysterious phrases of how Jim Ford muffed four times, and that there could not be a doubt that Joe had a foul, and how they would lay three to one that Denzell would gag in Horace to-morrow.

Maggie was busy with her box of paper dolls, but Fanny had nothing to do but notice how warm the sun was, although the grass patch under the walnut

tree was nipped brown by the frost. She looked beyond the mass of smoky chimneys to where Mt. Hale rose like a green sugar loaf into the October sky.

"I'll tell you what would be good for Saturday," she said, with a wise little nod. "Paw-paws. You and Ned, Phil and Maggie and me, and more if you choose. Start by daylight, and go to Mt. Hale, and stay all day paw-paw hunting."

"And pack baskets!" cried Maggie, clapping her hands. "Dinner and supper both, Fan. We'd better take a lot, for our Phil--Oh, well, he's always hungry."

Phil's face grew very red, and Ned answered on behalf of his friend, "Paw-paw hunting? Bosh!"

"Don't you think it would be nice, Ned?" said Fan.

"Very nice for a lot of girls," loftily. "But I don't like paw-paws; mushy, sweet stuff. Anyhow, you couldn't climb Mt. Hale, and if you did, there's no paw-paws on it."

"I've been to the top twice. And the paw-paws are on the side"--quietly. "But we'll not go. Come in, Maggie."

The girls disappeared in the house. As soon as they were out of sight Ned threw down his sandpaper.

"I tell you, Phil, it's just the thing."

"Mt. Hale? Yes, it would be jolly. We'll go Saturday. There's Jim and John Stiles, and Sam Bender'll go, and--oh, lots! And mother'll put up a market basket of dinner, and your mother'll do the same; and----"

"But about the girls?"

"Oh, no matter about the girls! They're always in the way, stuck in the mud, or screaming at snakes, or crying out 'Oh, how can you?' if a fellow gets a bird's nest or trees a bunny, or anything."

"That's so!" rejoined Ned. He sandpapered away in silence for awhile, and then looked up.

"Tell you, Phil, it would be mean to leave 'em out. It was Fan thought of it, you know."

"Yes, I was just thinking that," for Phil always took Ned's opinions second-hand as his own.

"We'll let them in. Fan, and your Maggie, and--well, Jenny Bowler hasn't much nonsense about her. But none of that Symons set. No, sir!"

"No, indeed. And about the fellows?"

"Oh, of course I won't have the Stilesees or that crowd where Fan is. Sam Bender's all right. Fan!" beckoning with his plane to the window and

sauntering up. "Phil and I are willing to take you girls out, Saturday. We've thought over the places and settled on Mt. Hale."

"Oh, thank you, boys!" cried little Maggie.

"You can tell Jenny Bowler she may go, but nobody else, mind. You needn't trouble yourself about any arrangements. We'll attend to everything."

"Very well," said Fan. But she laughed to herself when they were gone, and then hurried to write a note to "Miss Jenny Bowler. Private and immediate."

Fan was the only girl alive, her father said, who never asked questions. The time passed until Friday evening, and she had not shown the slightest curiosity as to Ned's arrangements, though he and Phil went about in an exasperating state of fuss and mystery.

"We're all ready for to-morrow," said Ned at last.

"Provisions?" Fan looked up from her beadwork. "You know what Maggie says of 'our Phil's appetite.'"



"Then our Phil's father ought to have come to his rescue. Didn't take the slightest interest whatever. Wouldn't put down a penny. However, we managed it. We've got Bender's buggy and Sharp's old mare, and eight pounds of crackers."

"Is that all?"

“Why, what more do you want? The buggy’s for you girls. And we’re going to shoot game, and catch fish for dinner. Hunters never take anything but bread with them.”

“Oh!”

Fanny pricked away at her beads. Presently, she said gently, “Ned, if I might advise--we girls can easily walk, and that old mare of Sharp’s is blind and lame. You’ll find her harder to manage than a dozen tired girls. And I really don’t think I’d bring my gun. There’s always risk of accident with children like Maggie about.”

“I have made the arrangements, Frances. I did not, I believe, ask for any advice.”

When Ned said Frances matters were grave indeed. Fanny was silent.

Early the next morning Sharp’s old mare, Betty, arrived, Bender’s old buggy lumbering behind her, threatening to go to pieces at every turn. The three girls were hoisted in with difficulty, while Ned stood up to drive. An enormous bag of crackers lay in front--“The whole of Smith’s stale stock,” Maggie whispered, peeping in with a wry face. Phil and Sam marched alongside, loaded with guns and fishing-rods.

On they went from Dr. Thorpe’s door, down Church street into Main, past the warehouses and mills. Would they never get out of town? The buggy creaked, the old horse stumbled and puffed, and finally began to wheeze and snort, precisely like a steam-tug. Ned’s face grew scarlet, though he tried to laugh. The mare’s walk grew slower and slower.

“Hello, Ned! Going to a funeral?” called some boys from the sidewalk.

“Bound for the races, Ned?” shouted another. “Blooded stock there.”

He could see two gentlemen going down the pavement glance at each other and hide a smile, and one pretty young lady laughed outright. Phil and Sam had pushed on before, ashamed of the turnout. At last Mrs. Betty stopped altogether, to treat herself to a comfortable wheeze in quiet.

Ned looked round in despair.

“Girls, I’m very sorry, but if you’d only get out and walk a bit, may be I could get her out of town faster.”

Out scrambled the girls, only too glad to be released.

The end was that they walked to the top of Mt. Hale, while Betty wheezed and puffed and balked behind. But once on the mountain top, what was Betty or any other trouble? Mt. Hale was one of the steep hills that overlook the Ohio. Underneath, the black, bituminous smoke of the town drifted like a

passing cloud across the broad landscape of sunlighted, rolling hills and misty valleys. The river, yellow and glistening, wound from one horizon to the other. Here and there a trail of white smoke showed where a steamer lay.

But the children did not look long at river or landscape. They only knew they were high in the air, above the rest of the world; the moss was deep under their feet; old oaks and sycamores rose like giants overhead; through the tangled undergrowth glowed the golden-green paw-paws, full of luscious meat. There were miniature ponds, dark with sumach; bushes, brooks, like glittering threads, among the rocks.

"There's lots of minnows in those runs," said Ned. "You try for them, Sam, and Phil and I will bring down a squirrel or two. Broiled squirrel will be very good for dinner;" for the boys, who had eaten no breakfast in their excitement, began to feel, after their five miles' walk, that dry crackers were not so palatable as they seemed yesterday.

Betty was tied to a tree, where she could nibble at will. Ned put the crackers in a basket and hung them on a paw-paw bush.

"Are they quite safe there?" said Maggie anxiously.

"Now what would hurt them?" cried Phil. "Boys, I believe Mag thinks these woods are full of tigers and lions. Girls are so fussy!" in a pitying tone, as they walked away guns in hand.

"Women," said Ned, "are well enough in their place. But their place, you see, is the house. They don't somehow know how to get along out of doors."

Fan and Jenny had apparently a good deal to do out of doors. There were paw-paws to gather, and moss, and roots, and ferns for their herbariums, and then they sat down and began some weighty school secrets, having established Maggie out of hearing in a doll's house at the root of a tree. Now and then, the whiz of a gun would be heard, but the sun crept overhead and began to go down on the other side, and the boys did not appear.

"I am so hungry!" cried Maggie, with a little sob.

"So are we," said a voice behind her, and Sam Bender came up. "Where are the girls, Maggie?"

"I don't know. They've been gone half an hour. It's awfully lonely here. Where's your fish, Sam?"

"Yes, where's your fish, Sam?" shouted Ned, coming with Phil through the thicket. The boys were a little boisterous, as if they wanted to cover some uneasiness.

"Well, the fact is, I haven't any. Plague on the minnows! they'd shy at the bait, do what I would. But minnows are poor eating for a hungry man, and here are six of us," for by that time the two girls came strolling up from the hollow, loaded with moss.

"Where's the game, boys? I'm a good hand at skinning a squirrel."

Ned looked at Phil, and Phil stared after a bird that was flying past.

"I hadn't a single chance for a good shot, to-day," growled the latter hunter.

"I nearly winged two," said Ned, "and I just grazed a fellow going into his hole--hit the top of his tail. It was as pretty a shot as ever I saw."

"Do you mean," said Sam, "that you've shot nothing--nothing at all?"

Phil gave a foolish laugh.

"That's about it," said Ned.

There was a dead silence. Then poor little Maggie began to sob. "I'm as hungry as ever was, and we're here in this big forest, and Betty can't take us home, and we'll die of starvation. I eated just one bun for my breakfast this morning. A girl can't live forever on one bun."

"It's this gun," said Ned, giving it a vicious shake. "Nobody could have aimed better than I did!"

"Look there!" screamed Jenny. They all turned in dismay, to see an enormous pig dashing through the bushes, the cracker basket around her neck like a necklace, munching as she ran, while a napkin streamed out of one side of her jaws, and the cracker bag out of the other. The boys gave chase, shouting and flinging stones, but the harder they ran, the more recklessly the triumphant hog threw herself headlong through bush and brake. They gave up at last, and came back.

"Well, there's an end of the last chance," said Ned.

"There are plenty of paw-paws," suggested Fan.

"The very thought of them sickens me. The only thing left is to go home as fast as possible. It's a miserable end to the day."

"I think," said Fan, trying to keep a laugh out of her face, "I think I see a smoke. Come and let us see if it is a troop of wandering Indians with buffalo meat. Who knows, Maggie?"

Down through the bushes they rushed, over the brook, round the high peak of the hill. There, in a sheltered little cove made by the rocks was a glorious wood fire, a great heap of delicious biscuits well buttered, a steaming pot of coffee, cold chicken.

"And here is beef to frizzle, and two slices of ham to broil," said Fan, talking very fast, her cheeks red as roses, and her eyes bright. "Get two forked sticks, boys, so," placing it in their awkward fingers. "Isn't it splendid?"

Phil and Sam gave a tremendous cheer that made the woods ring. Maggie joined in with her shrill little pipe, and jumped like a crazy child. But Ned was very quiet.

"These are mother's biscuits. How did you bring the things, Fan?" he said.

"In the seat of the buggy."

"How good they are!"

Never did any meal taste like that one, though the ham was scorched and the beef was fairly burned. They did not leave a crumb nor a bit of meat, though Maggie pleaded hard for the little birds. She had not exaggerated the appetite of "our Phil," and to tell the truth the others were quite his equals.

The girls walked home, I am ashamed to say. The road was steep, and made of slippery clay.

The buggy perpetually ran down on Betty's heels, and such were her asthmatic puffs and snorts, that the boys declared the people living on the mountain would fancy a steamer had missed its way, and was scaling the height. Ned and Phil both had to hold her head to bring her down in safety; and it was quite dark before they reached the town. But nobody could now mistake the procession for a funeral.

"I never had more fun in my life," said Sam.

"Nor such a dinner!" responded Phil. "Ned, what d'ye say to going again some Saturday--soon?"

"All right! But"--lowering his voice--"let's leave the girls to manage. There's more in girls than I thought"--reflectively--"but it wouldn't do to tell them so."

The Leather Harness

Along the banks of the blue Connecticut were dotted the substantial white houses, and the graceful elms of the village of Hadley--an old town now, and almost hidden out of sight by the stately sweep of the great elm branches; but then scarcely beyond the age of a "settlement," and content with ways and goings that we should call very primitive. But the houses, standing to this day, show by their solid square walls and gambel roofs and handsome finishings within, that their owners felt they had a dignity to preserve, even though working their fortunes out of colonial soil, almost beyond the reach of the king's benediction.

And the great waving seas of broomcorn and tobacco, rising and falling on every August breeze to-day, tell us what those fortunes may have grown to be; or rather, how full the cellars and granaries must have been; for the purses were not so easily swelled.

There was little money in circulation, and little market for what their famous "meadow-land" produced; but what of that? Everything that the palate could desire was stored in abundance in the house; and there was goose every day for dinner, if one could judge from the flocks that hissed across the greensward between the double row of elms along the street. And under every roof was a loom where the thrifty housewife fitted out her family with homespun suits in which stately gentlemen were quite content to follow everyday vocations. "Boughten suits" of cloth purchased at the store, were reserved for solemn and grand occasions and for the more ordinary wear of the great dignitaries of the town--the minister, the squire and the high sheriff of the county.

And what that dignity, particularly as embodied in the minister, really was, boys growing up in modern days can never fully comprehend; they can only listen to stories they hear their fathers and uncles, or great-uncles telling among themselves, just as they listen to the tales of encounter with painted Indians. No such thing nowadays; gone forever.

Imagine a set of boys wild with the excitement of their games, tumbling over or racing past each other, pell mell, helter skelter, like mad, when, at a muffled cry from one of them, "There comes the minister!" the whole troop are suddenly transfixed, stand for an instant as if struck by a thunderbolt, and

then falling into ranks wait motionless, hat in hand, until that embodiment of sacred truth in gown and bands has passed them by!

But Parson Hopkins, though he knew how to preserve his dignity, and could look stern enough on Sunday when teaching those very boys how very far they were from keeping a perfect law, had enough of the true spirit of his Master hidden behind those stiff white bands to kindle a good many sparks of sympathy with all that interested them. A tradition is handed down of his even having been seen on the greensward, gown and all, playing the best bat in all their game of ball. Be that as it may, he had two boys of his own, who played him a trick that is repeated on their parents by boys of this generation; that is to say, they grew up rapidly and before he realized the fact stood head and shoulders above him; Nathan was within a week of being twenty-one, and John a year behind him.

When this crisis had arrived, the old gentleman summoned Nathan to his study, an event which would once have seemed to him of awful solemnity, and even now, that he felt himself within one week of being a man, wore an aspect most thoroughly to be respected.

His father, in a dark-green gown of ample folds, sat behind his study table; a sermon on the inalienable gift of free will lay half completed before him, a freshly starched neck band had been put on for the occasion, and his light hair combed directly toward his nose and square cut across the middle of his forehead, showed respect for the occasion by the smoothness with which it lay upon his reverend head.

“Nathan,” he said, “a few days will bring you to that age when a man is expected to take a position of his own, and begin to make way for himself in the world. You have been a dutiful son, Nathan, and I wish to give you as handsome an outfit as lies in my power. There is a deed of three acres of my meadow land, and I shall add to it a freedom suit of ‘boughten’ cloth and a leather harness. If I abounded more largely in worldly goods, I could rejoice for your sake; but I give you what I can and you must make of it what you can. And you may be sure my blessing goes with it.”

The old gentleman reached his hand toward his son, who had remained standing all this time, for young people in those days never ventured to sit in the presence of their parents unless invited. The grasp was warm and strong, but was also a signal that Nathan was dismissed; and having thanked his father as properly as he knew how, he closed the door and descended the stairs with all the speed his new grandeur would permit.

A "boughten suit," and a leather harness.

And himself a man, dismissed affectionately from his father's care to see what kind of a show he could make for himself in the world with three acres of meadow land as a foundation. He met his brother John as he reached the hall, but passed him with very little notice. A dignity like his must be considered by all parties.

But the year that was to make a man of John also whirled quickly round, and he, in his turn, was summoned to that solemn place of audience, the study.

"John," said his father, "I wish to do as well by you as I did by Nathan, and would gladly have done better by you both. Your freedom suit shall be of 'boughten cloth' like his, you shall have a leather harness and here is a deed for the meadow land, as fine a piece as his. And may you do well with it, my boy. It is only a beginning, but that is all a young man needs. We will see what you will work out for yourself."

John had been standing at a respectful distance from his father, listening to what he said with a gaze fixed upon the floor. Now he raised his head, and looked at the parson with an earnest face and frank, honest eyes.

"Father," he said bluntly, "you are very kind, and I trust I shall always prove a grateful and dutiful son. But I don't want a 'boughten suit' and a leather harness. I don't want anything I may have to come down from. A rope harness is good enough for me, and so is the homespun I have worn all my life. If I am able to work my way up from them to something better that I have earned for myself, why then I can wear it and feel like a man; but if I begin with fine feathers only to drop them out, or draggle them in the mud, I shall cut a sorry figure by and by."

For a moment the reverend face was betrayed into an expression of surprise, but it was quickly followed by another of hearty approval.

"Take your own way then, my son," he said; "it is a good principle to start upon. Only add to it the fear of God and the love of your neighbor, and I shall live to see you all I could desire."

A few days later John might have been seen setting resolutely forth on his first visit to his new farm, for the planting season was just coming on, and the broad meadows, stretching up and down the river without a fence to mar them, were dotted everywhere with carts and plows, horses and busy farmers, passing up and down the long furrows with merry sounds.

As he walked sturdily beside his horse he met his brother, mounted in his cart, driving in the opposite direction, and greeted him with a cordial smile, which, was returned only by a contemptuous glance at the rope harness.

"You think I am a great fool, don't you?" said John, laughing good-naturedly.

"Well, I don't know that I should say that?" replied Nathan rather coldly, "but I don't agree with you. Take all you can get in this world; that's my principle."

"And precisely what I mean to do," said John, "but the first thing is to get it. Taking what is given you when you are not sure you can hold on to it, I don't like as well. But wait a minute, though; there's a bit of rope caught in your harness, let me pull it off for you."

"No, no," said Nathan, "it's a piece I put in there. You see that strap wore out and I couldn't very well have it replaced, so I worked in a bit of rope instead. It draws just the same."

"A pity, though," said John; "it doesn't look as well as leather. But I must get to my work. Good-morning and success to you."

He plodded on, and so did time and seasons; and meanwhile the two brothers worked, not only their farms but their principles.

Nathan's, if he had condescended to extend his remarks in the meadows, would have been not only "Take what you can get," but "don't trouble yourself too much about getting it. Make a good appearance in the world, and trust to things coming to you without too much hard work;" while John's "Yes, but the first thing is to get it," meant also, "if you have your way to make in the world, go to work and make it. Don't despise humble beginnings, but aim at something higher. Don't stand with your gun on your shoulder either, but fire, and whatever you fairly bring down pick up and enjoy it."

The next spring the brothers met again, but the bit of rope in Nathan's harness had multiplied into three or four.

"How does your harness wear?" he asked. "Mine breaks away, here and there, and as I did not realize all I hoped on my crops last year I feel a little pinched, and have mended it as I could."

"Seems to me rather soon for a leather harness to be giving out if it is well taken care of," said John. "I found mine getting a little weak in one place and I put in a leather strap. I thought that would be the best economy in the end."

So things went on, and before very long Nathan's splicings of rope grew more and more apparent, while as one portion after another of John's harness

became worn it was quietly replaced by a similar one of leather until the neighbors could not help noticing that the original leather harness was becoming rapidly transformed into one of rope, while John's more humble outfit assumed, gradually but steadily, a more substantial character.

The "boughten suit," also, refused to meet the wear and tear of life without a protest, and one darn after another appeared, until at last a patch of homespun seemed the only resort, and after that final disgrace the whole was dropped off, and a substitute from a home loom, and rather coarser than usual, took its place.

John worked steadily on, and with industry and his new harness in a few years had laid up capital enough to buy a partnership in the village store. The partnership soon became an ownership, and village store-keeping being profitable John one day found himself able to gather up his possessions and invest them in a fine business in Boston.

And the day came when with "boughten" clothes of the most gentlemanly cut the city could afford, and with his own horses and carriage, he came to make his native town a visit, and to find that Nathan and all his affairs had been growing more and more ropy all the while.

"Take all you can get honestly in this world, brother," said John, with the old frank smile; "a pretty good rule sometimes, especially just now," and he slipped into his hand a check for a thousand dollars, with which Nathan was very happy to pay off the mortgage on his farm, buy a new harness, and make himself more comfortable in several ways.

Which way do you think the best, in taking all you can get?